

Puppy-Dog Eyes

Chapter 1 – Number Four Privet Drive

The motorcycle throbbed and growled under him as he navigated the streets below. With a baby cradled in his left arm, the bear of a man alternated between steely determination and blubbering like a child. For the thousandth time since the flight began, Hagrid gazed at the face of the boy with awe. Harry Potter slept unaware, sighing innocent baby sighs in his sleep. “Poor little orphan” crooned the giant, another tear trickling down his bearded face. “It’ll be years before you understand what ‘cha did fer us.”.

The low rumbling of the flying motorcycle broke the silence of Privet Drive. Two people standing in the dark road looked up expectantly as the magical vehicle fell out of the air and landed in front of them.

“Hagrid,” said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. “At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?”

“Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sir,” said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. “Young Sirius Black lent it to me. I’ve got him, sir.”

“No problems, were there?”

“No, sir – house was almost destroyed, but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin’ around. He fell asleep as we was flyin’ over Bristol.”

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was the baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning.

“Is that where - ?” whispered Professor McGonagall.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “He’ll have that scar forever.”

“Couldn’t you do something about it, Dumbledore?”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t. Scars can come in handy. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground. Well – give him here, Hagrid - we’d better get this over with.”

Dumbledore took Harry in his arms and turned toward the Dursley’s house – the home of the baby’s aunt and uncle.

“Could I – could I say good-bye to him, sir?” asked Hagrid. He bent his great, shaggy head over Harry and gave him what must have been a very scratchy, whiskery kiss. Then, suddenly, Hagrid let out a howl like a wounded dog. He bawled and sobbed and choked out between his weeping “We CAN’T leave him with these here Muggles! Let me raise him, sir. Let me keep him safe in our world with his kind. I have plenty ‘o room in my hut! Please, Professor, Sir!” He gazed at Dumbledore with shameless puppy-dog eyes. It was quite a feat for a man of Hagrid size and stature.

Professor McGonagall’s eyebrows shot straight up, her eyes flashing a strange mixture of hope and disapproval at Hagrid’s emotional display. Dumbledore looked at Hagrid, looked at Harry, glanced over to the house he had been heading toward and finally back to Hagrid again. “Hmmm,” he spoke at last. “Perhaps you are right, Hagrid. From what Minerva says, these might not be appropriate guardians for our young hero. He needs a normal life, yes, but not an unnecessarily hard one.”

With a firmness of resolution, Dumbledore smiled again, and placed the sleeping child back in Hagrid’s trembling arms. “Take him back home to Hogwarts, Hagrid. Raise him as your own – we will all help, naturally. Have Poppy look him over when you get there. I’ll check in on you tomorrow.”

Joyfully Hagrid mounted the bike, carefully tucking the blankets around Harry, cradling him with protectiveness. “I will sir! I will – you won’t regret it, and neither will Harry!”

Professor McGonagall looked a little less ecstatic. “Hagrid!” she ran toward him “Do you have baby formula? Diapers? You need a bed for him! This isn’t just another puppy or spider! Hagrid? HAGRID!” But Hagrid, oblivious to all but his new charge, started the motorcycle,

gave an absentminded wave with his free hand, and sped up and off back into the night.

Dumbledore, clicking a small silver too that returned the street lamp lights back to their proper place, chuckled. "Don't worry Minerva. Remember – I trust Hagrid."

Chapter 2 – Of Flobberworms and Folly

Minerva McGonagall stepped lightly up to Hagrid's door, rapping with her knuckles while cradling a bag of sweets in her free arm. It had been a year since Harry came to live at Hogwarts, and the teacher couldn't love him more. Hagrid opened the door and she bent down to catch a running baby Harry, drooling and cooing "Aunt Minny!" 'Aunt Minny' quickly performed a visual scan of the happy baby, noting with disgust his dirty face, various scratches on his arms and legs, and the oh-too-obvious odor of a diaper long past its changing time.

Scooping up the child, while trying to wrinkle her nose without insulting Hagrid, she spun Harry around in a circle and plopped him gently in Hagrid's washtub and proceeded to pour warm water into it with her wand. Burbbling happily, the baby grabbed the candy stick offered by the adoring woman while she briskly and professionally made short work of all the offending dirt on his body. A quick drying spell and clean diaper later, and Harry was as good as new.

Bouncing Harry on her knee, Minerva looked over at the beaming Hagrid with a touch of concern. "Hagrid, where did Harry get all these scratches?" she asked, leveling her eyes on his face.

"Oh 'twernt nothing, Minerva. Nuttin' at all. We was just feeding the flobberworms I got fer the third year's class, and one o' the little blighters nipped out o' his cage. I took care o' it".

"Flobberworms?" squeaked the elderly witch, looking positively white. "Couldn't you be just a little more careful with a baby around?" Minerva hated to criticize her friend – the giant had the heart of a, well, giant. But at times, Hagrid failed to understand that was harmless and cute in his opinion, more often that not proved to be dangerous, venomous, or just plain too snippy to be around children.

"Here, Rubeus" Minerva handed the giant a rolled up parchment. "It's your official adoption papers for Harry, back from the Ministry. His name is now Harrison Hagrid, but naturally we can keep calling him Harry. Albus had to pull quite a few strings to make this happen – Minister Fudge wasn't too pleased about the 'Boy-Who-Lived' being adopted by a half-giant, but Albus convinced him." She gave a small

sigh and proceeded to heal the various wounds on the small child. It was her sincere wish that the Minister wouldn't end up having his worst fears realized.

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The seasons came and went on the relentless and swift wings of time. Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer again. Another year of classes at Hogwarts, with the female students all giggling and swooning over the adorable baby with his jet-black hair and green eyes. At first the students were amused (if not collapsing in gales of laughter) over the sight of the giant Hagrid fawning over the tiny boy, but it quickly became normal. As normal as anything could be in Hogwarts, that is.

Students didn't recognize Harrison Hagrid was Harry Potter. Rubeus had trained the boy's unruly hair into short dreadlocks which succeeded in covering his scar. Well, trained is a generous word – in actuality the unkempt hair, much to Minerva and Severus' disgust, ended up forming dread locks when his adoptive father didn't comb it often enough. The child was dirty and beat up looking enough, wearing mostly animal skins for clothing, that nobody in the magical world would ever suspect that the adorable but wild little boy was actually The-Boy-Who-Lived.

At Harry's third birthday Minerva approached Dumbledore with some concerns. Sitting in the circular office, trying hard to ignore the interested stares from the many portraits, she nervously sipped a cup of tea.

"Now what seems to be the trouble, Minerva" spoke Dumbledore in a kind voice, his eyes twinkling merrily while he sucked on a piece of hard candy. "Are you experiencing student problems?"

"No, no..." she hesitated – this was hard. "Albus, have you looked at Harry recently. I mean really *looked* at him? I love Hagrid like a brother – we all do, but...." She trailed off helplessly.

"What's wrong with Harry?" The twinkle stopped in Dumbledore's eyes, and he sat up stiffer in his chair.

“Well, Albus, I am concerned. And not just me – Severus and Poppy both agree. He’s not fed properly in my opinion. Just last week I found Harry and Fang fighting over a dog biscuit they were *both* chewing on. He should be toilet trained by now, and Hagrid hasn’t even started. His clothes are disgusting, and his only baths are the ones I give him. I still worry about his safety too – just today I caught Hagrid carrying him piggy back while going to feed the hippogriffs!” She sat back weakly after her tensely blurted speech.

Dumbledore smiled with his typical maddeningly patronizing smile. “Minerva, don’t let it trouble you. I assure you Harry is in fine hands. Hagrid might seem a bit coarse, but he’s merely raising the boy like he was brought up himself. You know how much he loves him.”

The elderly witch sat a bit stiffer in her chair. “Yes” she sniffed, “but we need to make sure he’s *safe*, Albus. And as headmaster, I would expect you to look into this.” With that she stood, gave the wizard one last meaningful look and strode out of the office.

The headmaster of Hogwarts picked a toffee from a bowl on his desk and sucked on it thoughtfully. “Ahem” coughed a portrait on the wall, with a slightly less than polite tone of voice. Albus glanced up at Phineas Nigellus Black, the least popular headmaster of Hogwarts past, noted dark arts follower and all-around devil’s advocate. “I still think he would have been better off with his Aunt and Uncle” sneered the painting in a silky voice. “So what if they don’t like the magic world? A bit of strict upbringing would bring out some strong magic in the child. And from what I’ve seen, he certainly doesn’t look like the future savior of the wizarding world.”

Chapter 3 – Of Books and Bruises

The Burrow was enjoying a cool and clear morning that summer. Everyone was home for the day, enjoying some time off to play on toy brooms and putter around the home. Molly had her hands full with seven pre-Hogwarts children, but was nonetheless in her glory. Boys fought over fresh-baked pastries, and Ginny, sucking her thumb, was gazing at her favorite picture book of The-Boy-Who-Lived.

Hagrid poked his head through the floo. “Ello! Anyone ‘ome?” he belted out, peering around the kitchen with his glittering black eyes.

“Hello, Hagrid!” Arthur Weasley trotted into the kitchen to see who was flooing. “To what do we owe the honor?”

Hagrid grinned at his red-headed friend. “Ello Arthur! I was jest wonderin’ if I could pop over with ‘Arry. Poppy thought it were important for ‘im to play with others his age, and I know you got a pack ‘o youngins.”

“Sure, Hagrid – come on through” Arthur nodded, pleased. Although he couldn’t tell his daughter that Hagrid’s son was really the boy of her favorite picture book, he and Molly would sure get a kick out of it.

With a grunt of pleasure, Hagrid stooped and bent his huge frame practically in half to enter the Burrow’s kitchen. Arthur clapped the giant on the back and pointed to the tea pot, to which Hagrid grinned in acceptance. The father of seven was waving his wand over the pot and gathering mugs (searching for something large enough for his friend to use) when heard the sound of a young child giggling. “I thought you were bringing Harry with you?” he asked, glancing in back of the man.

“I did – he’s right here, Arthur” Hagrid laughed, and actually pulled the young boy out of his pocket by the shirt collar. The effect wasn’t unlike a mother dog carrying its pup by the scruff of its neck.

He set his son down, and Arthur, forgetting the tea for the moment, stared that the kid in mute shock. Harry was supposed to be the same age as his Ron, but he was a good bit shorter in size and stature. The child was filthy, with matted brown dreadlocks (and

Arthur wasn't sure if the hair was actually brown or it was dust and dirt clinging to the kid's hair), and wearing an odd assortment of animal pelts, cast off clothing, and what looked to be an old burlap bag.

"Got any candy?" Harry chirped at the man, little five-year-old hands held out expectantly.

"Er, not before lunch, my little man" Mr. Weasley reached over to pat the boy on the head, but on second thought, withdrew his hand and smiled at him instead.

"OK" the kid agreed pleasantly enough. "Where are your boys?"

"They are outside, young Harry" Arthur started looking around for his wife. "I'll take you to meet them." He gestured Hagrid and his young charge out the door and caught his wife's curious eye, beckoning her over with a slight jerk of his head.

"Hagrid! How are you? And this must be young Harry!" the plump witch oozed with all that is good and maternal, balancing a shy four year old Ginny on her hip. She turned and shouted at her herd of red-haired children "Ron! Fred, George, Percy! Bill and Charlie! Come here and meet someone!"

Harry had ducked behind his father's massive frame, and peeked out to look at the six boys trying to crowd around him. All of the kids had flaming red hair and friendly faces. Two of the boys were so identical Harry could not tell them apart. He looked up nervously at his beaming father.

"Go on and play, Harry. These are good kids – you'll have fun" and he gave his boy a gentle push toward the pack of 'people puppies'. With a last nervous look at his Papa, Harry walked bravely toward the Weasley boys.

"Harry? Harry who? What's your name?" Little Bill Weasley looked at the tiny, dirty boy up and down. Percy took a glance and wandered off immediately. He had absolutely no interest in the filthy little kid.

“Harry Hagrid” Harry answered back shyly, feeling very uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

“Whoa! You’re Hagrid’s kid?” Charlie yelled out with excitement. “Hagrid knows all the animals in the forest! Do you have a dragon yet?”

The small green-eyed boy smiled at Charlie’s excitement. “Nope. But we got a whole flock of Hippogriffs!” Charlie could hardly contain himself.

“Do you live in the castle?” one of the twins broke in. He loved his older brother, but he didn’t want to hear about magical creatures the rest of the day.

“Sort of” Harry explained. “We live in a hut next to the castle. It’s closer to the animals.”

Ron, who had been sitting to the side, was growing more and more jealous of the regard the visitor was getting. The newcomer was filthy, dressed in rags and fur, and nothing important to look at. Why was he getting all the attention? “You look awfully tiny for a giant’s kid” he muttered sullenly.

Harry glared at the redhead. How dare he? He was enjoying talking with the boys, and he had to say something mean. With a primal yell of fury the diminutive boy launched on Ron, pummeling, scratching and biting like a beast. Ron’s brothers all gaped in amazement for a few seconds and then joined in the fray – nobody messed with a Weasley!

It was over in a matter of minutes – the sharp ears of Molly and Arthur heard the ruckus and spelled a few ice-cold buckets of water to soak everyone into shocked submission. Six dripping and bleeding boys sat in the yard, five of whom were cringing and awaiting their mother’s guaranteed screeching to come. Each one of them sported a split lip or black eye, and in the spirit of young manhood, each had enjoyed themselves immensely.

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Molly and Arthur sat weakly in their pallor. They were exhausted. Never in their wildest dreams would they imagine the Boy-Who-Lived would be not much more than an animal. Charming smile and mesmerizing green eyes graced the face of a wild beast. They had spent the rest of the day trying to keep him from fighting each of their boys in turn, grabbing candy from poor little Ginny (who promptly decided she didn't like the 'smelly boy'), and he even ate with his hands! During lunch Arthur had to convince Harry that Charlie didn't really need to see how chimps could eat with their feet. And he truly, truly did not want his wife to know that he caught the young Mr. Hagrid marking all her flowers and shrubbery on the side of the house like a dog!

It had been hard to keep the boy in clothes. Molly could understand why no one in their right mind would want to wear such a disgusting assortment of skins and sacks, but nude? He was illiterate – Molly had tried to calm him down by reading everyone a book and having each child point out words they recognized – Harry knew not one. And worse of all, when putting her bruised and beaten boys to bed that night, she was horrified to find she had to de-flea each one of them. Dumbledore would be hearing from her in the morning.

Chapter 4– Much To Do About Harry

The next three years went by swiftly for the Hagrids. Rubeus tended the animals needed for classes and kept an eye on the Forbidden Forest and his son. Harry, soon after his first visit with the Weasleys, was sent to private lessons with Snape and McGonagall to get him caught up with manners, grooming, and education. Snape was less than pleased at the beginning, but found the child to be bright and easy going and ended up enjoying his time with the boy.

The extensive hours Minerva and Severus spent on Harry did pay off – the boy could read, write, and do math with his peers now, and he was properly dressed some of the time. The teachers of Hogwarts would give him robes, feeling sorry for the waif, but sooner or later they would end up being grabbed by the boy's father to wrap around a newborn foal or to tote firewood in. Rubeus just did not give grooming and clothing a lot of importance in his list of daily priorities.

Although he would visit and play with the Weasleys quite frequently, mostly due to Molly's kind heart and the pity she felt for Harry, he was still rather uncouth and prone to scrapping. But her boys did genuinely like Harry – there was something about the child that was so open and honest, one could not help but feel charitable toward him. Ginny, on the other hand, avoided him at all costs.

As much as the Weasleys enjoyed Harry, however, other children didn't. At the age of eight, when most wizard's offspring were starting to learn their role in society and work out strategic relationships, Harry was a bit of a loner. The same students of Hogwarts who once found the five year old so adorable, now found the eight year old dirty, rustic, and annoying. He was way too easy to pick on.

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Albus Dumbledore sat behind his desk, studying the four people sitting across from him. Snape, Minerva, Molly and Poppy were each fidgeting in their seats, obviously not looking forward to saying what they came to say. And Albus felt sure he knew what it was about.

“And what have you come to tell me about young Harry now, friends?” the headmaster twinkled, catching the adults by surprise as always.

With a deep breath, McGonagall started in. “Albus – we all love Rubeus. All of us. But we all feel it’s in Harry’s best interest to find a different guardian. One outside of Hogwarts.” She looked to the others for support, and they all nodded in agreement.

“And why is that?” Albus asked kindly. He had been expecting this, and wasn’t going to put up much of a fight.

“Headmaster” the rich baritone of the potions master intoned, “I’ve grown fond of the boy – Potter or not. But it seems every time we gain ground in teaching the lad manners or decorum, his ‘father’ sends him two steps backwards. He has potential – his wild magic is powerful, his mind is quick and teachable. His father is, er, not.”

Molly, Minerva and Poppy winced at the starkness of Severus’s statement, but did not contradict it, Albus noticed.

“Albus, I had to treat him for a broken arm just this morning. The child is a walking history of accidents and disasters.” Poppy glared at the ancient wizard sitting across from her for emphasis. “Hagrid had taken the boy with him to play with the centaurs! You *know* how the centaur children dream of picking on a human! If it’s not burns from the skrewts, its black eyes from the Weasleys, or stings from acromantula... he’s not a safe guardian for Harry and he never was.”

With a motherly tear dripping down her cheek Molly agreed. “Albus, the boy is minding his manners more. He has caught up academically, and he fits in better, but he’s still very wild. I don’t think he will fit in at Hogwarts unless he can be removed from all the craziness and brought up in a more formal atmosphere.”

“We all love Hagrid – you know we do” Minerva shook her head sadly. “But if Harry is the hope of the wizarding world, he’s going to have to learn discipline. He’s not getting it from his father.”

The headmaster popped another lemon drop into his mouth as everyone nervously sipped his or her tea. "Did you have anyone in mind?"

"Someone good, someone away from Hogwarts" Molly answered simply. "I'd take him in a heartbeat, but I'm afraid he's too used to fighting with my sons. He would not progress any farther with us. He needs a new environment."

"And strict, headmaster" Snape broke in. "I don't mean cruel or abusive, but firm and fair."

A mocking laugh rang from the wall, and the five witches and wizards looked up at the chortling portrait of Phineas Black. "I told you Albus, years ago. The boy would be far better off with his blood relatives. Go see them and give it some thought. Don't just drop the boy off on the doorstep like a bottle of milk – any sane adult would resent that. Meet them and explain what is going on."

"Hmmm" Dumbledore murmured. "Perhaps I'll pay Petunia a visit and feel her out."

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Petunia and Vernon Dursley did not know what to expect. They had been notified eight years ago by an owl, of all things, regarding the death of her sister and brother-in-law. Lily and Petunia had been very close as children, but once her sister received that blasted letter from Hogwarts, the rift started and widened with the years. Soon the two young women had found they had little in common but blood, and drifted farther and farther apart. Petunia found herself wondering occasionally what ever happened to the boy they had, but assumed he was happy with relatives from the Potter side of the family. What Dumbledore told her chilled her to the bone.

Eight years later, out of the blue, the senile and eccentric old man rang her doorbell and wanted to talk to them about Harry. No word or news for eight years, no way to contact the magical world, and now this. Their nephew, it seems, had been raised by a giant of all people, and now needed some proper upbringing. Just like wizards – make a mess and then have decent people clean it up.

They had a son of their own, a few months older than Harry. Dudley was their pride and joy – a robust athletic boy, confident and boisterous. Perhaps not the best student in his class, but still the apple of their eye. Would a half-giant boy hurt their Dudders? Would his magic harm them?

But still, family was family and blood is far thicker than water. Sending Dudley off to stay with Aunt Marge for the weekend, they agreed to meet their nephew and consider taking him in for the next three years. They waited by the front window nervously to catch their first glimpse.

At exactly the pre-arranged time Dumbledore came striding down the front path of their garden, a small boy in tow. Petunia's first impulse was to wince at the garish purple embroidered robes the man wore – she only hoped any neighbors home and watching would think he was coming from a fancy dress party. But her attention was soon riveted on the tiny dirty little boy by his side. Could that be Harry Potter? Vernon gasped with shock – he had spotted the boy too.

Opening the door swiftly, they motioned the strange pair in and served tea. Harry sat quietly in his seat, though he fidgeted and gawked like any other eight year old would in similar circumstances. Petunia eyed him critically. Lily was petite, so she shouldn't have expected Lily's son to be a giant just because he was being raised by one. But she expected a larger kid than this! He was positively puny – a good six inches shorter than Dudley. And what was the poor child wearing? Was that animal pelts? She wrinkled her nose in disgust, despite herself, as she noted his filthy dreadlocks and a flea biting the boy on his neck. Was *this* how wizard's raised their children? Without even realizing it, on the spot she vowed to rescue the poor child.

Vernon was just as stunned as his wife. Petunia would never let a child out of the house looking like that! Filth and burlap bags... oh the child was being polite enough, but how can anyone let a child get in this condition? He could show those uppity wizards a thing or two about child rearing! He looked over the boy's arms with astonishment – there was all manner of bruises cuts and scrapes marring the kid's skin. Was he being abused?

Harry was gaping around the room. He had never seen inside a house except for the Burrow, Hogwarts and his own hut. Painted walls, still paintings, a clean kitchen and floors – it was all new to him. The telly was on, with the volume turned down, and there were talking men inside the box – what magic the muggles had! The home was brightly lit, but there were no smoking torches or candles – just these strange glowing balls of lights on the ceilings that gave off no heat that he could tell. How powerful these people must be!

“How are your grades in school, son?” Vernon asked kindly, watching the boy carefully for his response.

“Grades, sir?” Harry looked puzzled.

“Ah, two of the professors have taken it upon themselves to homeschool the lad” Dumbledore interrupted. “I think you will find he is equal to his peers in English, grammar, writing, and mathematics. I’m afraid we don’t have anything similar to your science or history however.”

Petunia arched an eyebrow. She had homeschooled Dudley for second grade so he could catch up with his peers. She could do the same for this poor child if he showed the aptitude. “Harry, what would you think of spending some time with us, to learn about our world?”

Harry was staring intently at the telly. He looked at her with his penetrating green eyes. “Would I be able to visit my papa sometimes?”

With a laugh Vernon answered him. “This would not be a jail, boy. We feel we could help round out your education before Hogwarts. Naturally you could visit your Dad, and he could visit here.” He found himself nodding at Petunia. Without need of discussion, they agreed. This poor little lad needed help, and they could give it.

Chapter 5 – The Smallest Bedroom

It was swiftly agreed and decided – Harry stayed with the Dursleys, and Rubeus would come with Dumbledore next weekend to bring his belongings. Albus disappeared away from the parlor, leaving the small filthy boy alone with the two kind looking strangers.

“Come, Harry,” Petunia motioned kindly toward the stairs. “We will set up the guest room as your bedroom. I wasn’t expecting you to stay immediately, but its fine. We have plenty of room.”

“My bedroom?” Harry squeaked with amazement. “My own bedroom?”

“Didn’t you have your own bedroom in your Dad’s home?” Vernon asked, trying not to look any more shocked than he had all day.

“Nope. I shared a basket with Fang on the floor” Harry nodded casually. Vernon did not have the courage to ask who or what Fang was.

Petunia reached the guest room door first and opened it. Harry stood in the doorway in stunned disbelief. There was the largest, softest, silkiest looking bed he had ever seen. A floral duvet covered it, and the room was faintly perfumed. Matching curtains graced the window, and the carpet was soft under his bare feet. He stared in disbelief and looked at his aunt and uncle with amazement. “I can sleep in there?”

“First, young man, we need to clean you up!” Petunia took his hand gently but firmly. “This room is for you and only you, but you need to get some of that dirt off so you don’t ruin your nice furniture.”

“I’ll run the bath, dear” Vernon headed to the bathroom.

“You have a bathroom? Just like the castle?” Harry was amazed. He never bothered to see if the Burrow had plumbing – he tended to use Molly’s garden when she wasn’t looking for *that* purpose. And the Hagrid’s hut, well, let’s just say the lake served several purposes. There, to his young astonished eyes, was his Uncle Vernon bending over an impossibly white tub, filling it with warm water. What a luxury!

Thankfully their nephew was not the least bit shy. He had no problem with his Aunt scrubbing him down like a toddler – Harry thought it felt great. The soap was soft and sweet smelling, and the water quickly turned dark with mud.

Petunia eyed the boy scratching at his scalp under a lock of matted hair. “Harry dear, what do you think about a haircut just like Uncle Vernon’s? You’d fit in better here, I think.” She eyed him anxiously, hoping beyond hope for an end to the disgusting dreadlocks.

“Just like Uncle Vernon’s?” Harry splashed with glee. “Bring it on! It will make me look just like the centaurs, too!” Petunia practically broke the sound barrier reaching for the barber scissors. Vernon backed away and lunged for a trash can with disposable liner.

One long bath with several changes of water and a buzz cut later, and Harry was a new boy. Vernon dried him off with a soft towel while Petunia went through Dudley’s wardrobe, finding some items he had outgrown. It pained the woman to give the boy a pair of used underwear, but the boy hadn’t been wearing anything under the burlap and pelts. Vernon discreetly took the old ‘garments’ out to the shed so the bugs wouldn’t enter the home.

Harry examined his new clothes carefully. The t-shirt was soft to the touch and brightly colored. The pants had five different pockets all around them, and no uncomfortable draft wafting across his privates. He grinned ear to ear with approval at his image in the mirror. “You guys are really nice” he said shyly, looking up at them with puppy-dog eyes.

Petunia and Vernon both choked up. They looked at each other and he squeezed his wife’s hand. This dear child needed a lot, but it would be worth it.

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Dudley and Harry were lying in the playroom on their stomachs, facing the television together. The playroom, which used to be called ‘Dudley’s Second Bedroom’ was happily turned into a shared room for the two to indulge in many happy hours of play together. There were many plastic soldiers littering the floor, a video console and

several games in the corner, bean-bag chairs and plenty of toy cars and action figures. Harry swooned with happiness whenever he looked at the room.

It had been close to a year since Harry came to live with his Aunt and Uncle. It was tough at first – Harry was given strict rules tempered with many hugs and kisses, and he had to learn to live with the restrictions. Bathing was mandatory, as were haircuts, clean clothes (and oh the new clothes he now owned!), and table manners. Everyone had chores to do, and a good attitude made the work seem lighter. And Harry learned why the Lord gave boys a padded backside the first time he tried to ‘mark’ his new territory on Aunt Petunia’s hydrangea bush. Far from resenting the paddling he got, he respected his aunt even more and never made the mistake twice.

There was the occasional oops with accidental magic, but Harry was never punished for that. It typically happened when Harry was frightened or mad, and the Dursleys had been warned what to look for and how to react. Harry, having lived with Wizards, understood what was going on and nobody was traumatized for the experience.

Hagrid would floo over (the Dursleys had their fireplace connected for convenience and to keep neighbors from gawking) every weekend. Although Harry did miss his papa, he really appreciated his bedroom, clothes, toys, and not itching and bleeding all the time. Swelling with pride Harry would show Rubeus what he learned that week from Aunt Petunia’s lessons, what art he created, or what games he and Dudley had played. And although the giant missed his boy, and would leave each visit with moist eyes, he was amazed at how mature and smart his son had grown in a year.

Harry and Dudley had hit it off from the start. Thanks to Severus and Minerva’s private lessons he had learned to better control his temper, and had very few relapses. Dudley was so much larger than Harry, all it took was Vernon’s permission to hit back, and Petunia’s rules about not fighting re-enforced with a careful application of a wooden spoon to his backside, and Harry came to see that he was not going to get away with scrapping in the Dursley household. And he didn’t want to anymore – Dudley was fun! Video games, action figures, slingshot practice – it was all new and exciting. The best was sitting around the

parlor at night listening to Uncle Vernon's stories from his early days in the Army as a munitions expert. Harry's eyes would glow with excitement – guns sounded like fun magic!

Petunia homeschooled Harry for third grade, and was pleased to find he was an eager and quick student. He had a hungry mind that seemed to soak up anything to do with the 'muggle world', as he called it, and particularly enjoyed science. It was a whole new way of looking at animals without needing healing potions, he explained.

When both Harry and Dudley had turned 10, Vernon presented them with BB guns and taught them to shoot. They were two responsible boys who obeyed all the safety rules, and were only allowed to shoot with an adult present. Vernon couldn't help but feel that this might come in handy someday for the lad. After all, he did have a dangerous past that he didn't seem aware of.

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Harry was sitting in the parlor with a cup of tea, watching his Aunt and Uncle squirm in their seats. They obviously had something difficult to say to him – they had sent Dudley off to Aunt Marge's for the weekend without him.

"Harry dear, what do you know of your father and mother?" Petunia asked kindly.

The boy looked at them with a puzzled expression. "Papa Hagrid? You know him, Aunty. He comes here every Saturday."

"No Harry, we mean your birth parents" Vernon said gently. Harry still looked as puzzled as before. "You mean nobody told you that you were adopted?" he asked, flummoxed as ever by the strange dealings of the magical world. Petunia and he traded helpless glances.

"Er, no" Harry stammered. "I just thought I was a runty giant. I never thought about having a mum until you, Aunty."

Petunia's eyes were suspiciously shiny as she took a deep breath. "Have you never wondered why we are your aunt and uncle?" she asked curiously.

He shook his short-cropped head. "Nope. Did you know my mum and dad?"

"It's a fine statement to how loved and wanted you feel not to worry about your past, Harry" Vernon nodded at the boy, "but we need to tell you about your heritage before you get your Hogwarts letter."

"Yes" his aunt sniffed. "Especially since Dumbledore didn't bother to prepare you. Harry, my sister, Lily, was your birth mother. Her husband, James Potter, was your father. Your birth name was Harry James Potter."

"Waaaait" Harry drawled out. "Is this some kind of joke? I've read that silly book at the Weasleys – every Wizard or Witch knows that story. I can't be Harry Potter." He frowned respectfully but with disbelief on his young face.

Petunia paled. "You mean they have books about you?" she asked weakly.

"It *is* me? The Boy Who Lived is *me*?" Harry tucked his feet up on the sofa and rested his chin on his knees with a puckered forehead. He recalled the book that Ginny had read countless times – the story that every child in the magical world grew up being told. The tiny baby whose parents were slain by the evil You-Know-Who for protecting him. The baby who was the only wizard powerful enough to kill He-Who-Won't-Be-Named. "So I didn't get this scar from a hippogriff?" he asked, rubbing the lightening bolt shaped scar on his forehead.

"No, lad" Vernon shook his head. "Your folks, Lily and James, died protecting you, and for some unknown reason when What's His Name tried to kill you with some mumbo-jumbo, it bounced right off of you and took him out."

Harry took a deep shuddering breath. "I'm glad I'm really your nephew" he finally answered quietly, to which Petunia and Vernon

surrounded him on the sofa, hugging him firmly. “But how did I end up a Hagrid?”

“Dumbledore didn’t really say, dear” Petunia answered with a frown. “For whatever reason, instead of contacting us he gave you to Rubeus to raise. It turns out you are the last of the Potters, so there would have been no blood relatives except for us. We have no idea why he did what he did – he must have thought you’d be safer that way. You are our nephew, but more than that – we love you like our own son.”

With that Harry bawled unashamedly into his Aunt and Uncle’s chests. He cried for the parents he never knew, cried for not knowing of them, and cried out of simple fear of the feared dark wizard that wished to kill him as a baby.

When he had calmed down and was soothed by his family, he looked at them with his shining green eyes. “What now? Will everyone know I’m Harry Potter?”

Vernon glared darkly at the fireplace that Dumbledore and Rubeus entered the muggle world through. “It’s up to you, Harry. You can take the name Potter back and put up with a lot of fame and unwanted attention. Or you can keep the good name of Hagrid and stay anonymous. That’s what I would do. Once you turn eleven in a couple of weeks we can take you to your bank Albus told us about, and there you can find some of your parent’s belongings, and maybe learn more about your past.”

He noticed the puzzled look that was fleeting across Harry’s face. “The name Potter is nothing to be ashamed of, Harry” Vernon explained, “but there might be followers of Moldyshorts, or whatever his name was that might mean you harm. That, and fame at your age isn’t good for a kid. You would have to trust us on that.”

“Won’t people recognize me by my scar?” Harry asked in a quiet voice. The books about the Boy-Who-Lived made a big deal out of the scar.

“Well” Petunia smiled, “We have an idea about that, if you want to stay a Hagrid and have a normal experience at Hogwarts. We know a

good plastic surgeon that could take care of it very quickly in his office."

Chapter 6 – Back to Hogwarts

And so Harry found himself that early September hugging his Aunt and Uncle goodbye outside of the barrier to 9 ^¾. On the trolley sat his new school trunk, filled with books and supplies and topped with a cage holding a beautiful owl – a parting gift from his sobbing Aunt. The previous weeks had been fun – the Dursleys had taken him to Diagon Alley with Hagrid, and he and Dudley had started a chocolate frog card collection on the spot.

At Gringotts, while the Dursleys sat at Fortescue's eating ice cream, Hagrid introduced him to the goblins and his vault, since he had other 'Hogwarts Business' to attend to. Eyes popping at the amount of money left him from his birth parents, he looked around at the other items for clues about his missing childhood. He decided on removing a box labeled 'important documents' and a couple of photo albums and rejoined his family. When they returned to Privet Drive his Aunt was able to identify several people besides his parents in the photos, and he gladly shared the pictures with her.

Harry gazed at the train with a smile of nostalgia. Papa had taken him to meet the Express several times as a young boy. With a feeling of content he dragged his trunk on board and found an empty compartment. He gazed out the window, wishing his aunt and uncle could have entered the barrier, but felt good knowing Papa Hagrid would be waiting at the other end of the ride.

He leaned back in his seat and admired his new owl trying to decide on a name. Hedwig – he recalled that name from one of his new magical books. That was a dandy name for an owl. Unconsciously he rubbed the itchy patch of skin on his head where his scar used to be – the laser surgery took care of it with no problem, but it still itched a bit when he was sweaty. It would be completely healed soon enough, and hopefully nobody would realize that Harrison Hagrid was in fact, Harry Potter.

The door to his compartment slid open and a red haired freckled youth looked at him inquisitively. "Is this seat taken? All the other compartments are filled" he asked hopefully.

“Ron? Ron Weasley?” Harry set Hedwig’s cage to the side and stood up in excitement, grinning from ear to ear.

“Do I know you?” Ron asked in confusion, looking at the green-eyed boy beaming at him. He did look sort of familiar, but he couldn’t recall for the life of him.

“Ha!” Harry laughed out loud. “Picture me with dreadlocks and a lot of dirt!”

“No!” Ron walked right up to him and gave him a playful punch in the arm. “Harry Hagrid? What happened to you? Mum and Dad said you went to live with muggles!”

Harry nodded in happy agreement. “Yep – some long-lost relatives. They cleaned me up some, eh?”

“Boy I’ll say!” Ron plopped down in the seat across from Harry. “You look great – love the hair, though Charlie always thought your locks were cool.”

The remainder of the train ride was spent catching up on the last few years. The twins were now notorious pranksters at Hogwarts, Bill was in Egypt working for Gringotts and Charlie in Romania working with dragons. Harry decided his Papa must not have known about that or he would have been talking about nothing else.

The remaining ride was spent meeting Hermione and Neville, and very briefly Draco Malfoy, who opened the compartment door only long enough to verify Harry Potter was not on the train.

The sorting hat wanted to put Harry in Slytherin at first – Harry certainly had a thirst to prove himself and a love of changing odds in his favor. But the hat eventually decided on Gryffindor when Harry begged it to let him stay with the Weasleys, much to Rubeus and Dumbledore’s delight.

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The beginning of the year was a blur. Harry was a natural on a broom and snatched up as the youngest seeker in a century. Draco Malfoy

was a bit jealous of Harry's prowess with a broom, but compensated by teasing him about his 'oaf of a father'. Harry just shrugged it off – better to be teased about a loving giant of a dad than to be gawked at as 'The-Boy-Who-Lived'.

It was difficult at times not to share who he really was with his friends, but he didn't want his friends to look at him any differently. It was really, really nice to be Harry Hagrid.

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Dear Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon,

Thanks again for the beautiful owl! I named her Hedwig. She is so smart – I swear she can understand every thing I say.

Hogwarts is great. The food is fantastic (although I miss your cooking, Aunt Petunia – especially your cookies), and I've got two best friends – Ron Weasley (who I use to know before I met you) and Hermione Granger. She's really smart.

I got sorted into Gryffindor. We have four houses here, and Gryffindor is the house mum and dad Potter were in! I'm playing on the Quidditch team, which dad did too.

How do you like this letter? I wish wizards used ball point pens. Ink and quills are sort of sloppy to use.

It feels sort of weird being back. Its nice seeing Papa every meal, but I don't miss living in the hut one bit. Please don't tell him that – I don't want to hurt his feelings. Aunt Minny and Poppy and Uncle Sev missed me – it's really nice to see them again.

I ran into Fluffy while sneaking around the castle one night. Remember Fluffy – Papa's three-headed dog? I guess he missed me – nothing like being slobbered all over by three giant dog heads. My friends Ron and Hermione were quite impressed.

One thing is sort of strange here. My Defense teacher, Quirrell, is really weird. I know it sounds kooky, but I swear a couple times when

he has looked at me, the place where my scar was hurt really really bad. I don't trust him – he acts like he's hiding something.

Is Dudley coming home for Christmas? I want to, if that's ok with you.

Thanks again for getting rid of my scar. Everyone here is all 'where is Harry Potter' and all that junk. You would not believe how girls talk about him! It makes me blush. Lots of kids ignore me because they think Papa is too 'uncultured'. Fine with me – I have friends who like ME!

Oh, Auntie – if you want to send cookies or anything (like cookies!), Hedwig can carry them, no problem!

Love you!

Harry

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Dear Harry,

So good to get your letter! We miss you and Dudley so much – the house is so quiet now. Hedwig is a smart owl. I asked her to wait so I could bake you a batch of your favorite cookies, and she understood! Hope you enjoy them. Did you know she really loves bacon?

Your uncle got a good laugh over wizards still using quills and ink. At least they are pretty.

Why would your papa keep Fluffy in the castle? He was rather large from what you said.

We are concerned about your scar. Please tell your headmaster about it. As it is a 'curse scar', perhaps this Quirrell is one of those Death Eaters, and he's somehow causing the pain? Your uncle has enclosed a gift to use in case of an emergency. Do NOT open his box or play with it without reading the directions first, ok? He says you will remember it from his stories.

Of course you can come home for the holiday! We would miss you terribly if you didn't. But if your Papa insists on your staying, we understand.

Much love,

Aunty and Uncle

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Dear Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon,

Thanks for the cookies! My dorm mates agree – muggle cookies are the best.

I wish Dudley could have spent Halloween here! Magic world Halloween is the BEST! We had a banquet, with floating pumpkins and lots of great food – so spooky! The coolest thing, however, is when a TROLL got loose in the castle! Everyone was suppose to go back to their dorms for safety, but Ron and I remembered that Hermione didn't know about it – he sort of hurt her feelings earlier in the day and she was hiding in one of the less used girl's rooms crying. So we went to tell her, and had to fight the troll ourselves! Don't worry – we are all fine. I wish I hadn't stuck my wand up its nose though – troll bogies are the worst. Because we saved Hermione we didn't get detention or anything! Wish I had one of your rifles, Uncle Vernon. That would have been much quicker than all the silly spells we had to use on it.

Well, that's all for now.

Love,

Harry.

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Albus Dumbledore sat sifting through his morning mail. The elves had removed the howlers that any headmaster will receive on a daily basis, the accounting department took the bills, and now he had the

small stack of letters from concerned or angry parents. It was all part of being a headmaster.

One letter stood out – it was written on muggle paper with muggle ink. Ah – it was from the Dursleys. Such nice folks – they had done a wonderful job with Harry. He'd open that one first.

Dear Headmaster Dumbledore,

Harry tells us in a letter home that a TROLL was loose in the castle, and three first-year students, he being one of them, actually had to fight this thing for their lives? HOW is this possible? I thought Hogwarts was (and I quote your very words) 'the safest place in all of Britain'.

From what I've read, trolls are around 20 foot high. Just how does one of these beasts wander into a castle unobserved? What kind of security, if any, do you have at that school?

From what we understand there are around 40 first year students at Hogwarts, 120 pre-teen students. There are 24 prefects and 15 members of faculty. Do you mean to tell me that 39 people in charge cannot keep track of 120 kids in an emergency, and three missing first years go unnoticed? I wish I had access to howlers – I would send you one every day for the rest of the year.

If we hear of anything dangerous happening to Harry again, I will send you the muggle equivalent of a howler. Trust me – you will not like it.

Petunia Dursley

Albus chuckled to himself. He really did have to look into how that troll entered Hogwarts. Probably something to do with the Weasley twins – they were such pranksters. 'Muggle equivalent of a howler'? What do muggles think they could possibly have that would catch a wizard by surprise. Ah well, back to work.

Chapter 7 - Hagrid and the Philosopher's Stone

Harry stood in the center of the Quidditch pitch, panting from the exertion. Somehow his broom became jinxed and tried to throw him, but he held on and caught the snitch. Victory was sweet. The crowd was screaming wildly, teachers were looking pale, and life was good.

It was a fine victory party in the Gryffindor common room. Harry felt a little distracted, though, as he tried to figure out what happened to his Nimbus 2000. As the party started to die down Hermione and Ron grabbed him and pulled him aside for a talk.

“Harry” Hermione whispered frantically, “I’ve been dying to tell you. We think it was Snape that jinxed your broom! Ron and I saw him muttering a spell while you were fighting your broom – he didn’t stop until I snuck under the stands and set his cloak on fire. Then your broom was fine.”

“Uncle Sev? That’s silly” Harry scoffed. “Uncle Sev might favor the Slytherins a bit, and not be all warm and fuzzy, but he wouldn’t hurt me.”

“I don’t know mate” Ron muttered, looking miserable. “I know you like him and all, but something strange was going on.”

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The next morning after potions, two nervous and one smirking Gryffindor waited behind after class. Professor Snape looked at the three students who were standing before his desk fidgeting. “May I help you?” he drawled in his most un-helpful voice.

Harry smiled in a very non-threatening way. “Uncle Sev, my friends here say it looked like you were casting the spell that made my broom go all wonky yesterday. I know you wouldn’t do that.” He gave the potion master a look of total trust and expectation, complete with shameless puppy-dog eyes.

Severus Snape gave a look of surprise and then flashed a quickest, faintest of smiles. “Very observant. 5 points to Gryffindor. If I can

prove it was either of you that set my robes on fire, however, I will deduct 50."

Hermione suddenly found something very interesting on her shoe to examine.

"No – I didn't curse your broom Harry." Snape continued, "I was casting the counter-curse – it was barely enough to allow you to stay on it and not get killed. When my robes *mysteriously* burst into flame, it broke my concentration, but thankfully also the concentration of whomever was jinxing your Nimbus." He sat back in his seat studying the trio. "I am greatly relieved you are unhurt. I can't say I'm real happy about my house losing the game."

"But who would want to hurt Harry?" Hermione burst out, eyes shiny with unshed tears. Ron nodded in mute agreement.

"Miss Granger, I can not answer. Perhaps his father has some enemies?"

"Hagrid? Everyone loves Hagrid" Ron scoffed.

"No, Mr. Weasley. Everyone does not love Hagrid. But be assured the staff are keeping an extra careful look out for any future threat against your friend here."

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Harry was sitting on the floor of his Papa's hut, having a visit after classes. Fang was lying next to the boy, huge drooling head resting in his lap, eyes looking up at his face in total canine adoration.

"Ron and Hermione thought it was Uncle Sev who was cursing my broom, Papa" Harry commented, stroking his former bed-mate's back and scratching behind his ears.

The giant snorted. "Pshaw – you know that's silly. But I want you to be careful, Harry. Someone doesn't like you. Perhaps they know your real name?" Rubeus frowned with concern as he fiddled with a bear trap.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me my real name, Papa?” Harry asked nonchalantly. It didn’t really bother him, but he was curious.

“Ah ‘Arry – I couldn’t. Dumbledore, great man that he is, was afraid you would accidentally tell someone. You were such a trusting lad” he sniffed and wiped a sentimental tear from his eye. “By the time you were old enough to trust with it, you were with yer Aunt and Uncle and Dumbledore said they would tell yer.”

“It’s OK, Papa. Anyway, I don’t trust Quirrell” the boy stated firmly. “I swear there has been a couple times my head has hurt badly when he was looking at me. There is just something funny about him. I don’t even think that’s a real stutter.”

“Now Harry, Dumbledore only hires the best. You know that. *Professor* Quirrell had to undergo some pretty tough questions to get the job here at Hogwarts.” He set the trap down on the massive table and gave his son a disapproving look.

“Papa, do you think this has something to do with whatever you have Fluffy guarding?” Harry stood up, rolling the drooling dog onto the floor.

Rubeus whipped his head up and stuttered nervously “F-f-fluffy? Guarding something? I dunno what cher talking ‘bout, Arry!” His rustic accent really came through when he was nervous.

Harry laughed, walked over and gave his father a hug. “Papa, it’s ok. I won’t say anything to anyone. I know Fluffy is guarding something – there’s a trap door in that room, and why else would Grampa Albus let you keep Fluffy in the castle? I mean *really!*”

His father stood up, nervously patted his boy on the back (bruising a rib or two in the process) and paced. “Now ‘Arry, you just keep that to yourself. There’s nothin’ in that room. And if there was, it’d be between Professor Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel. Oh – I shouldn’t o’ said that!” Hagrid sat down heavily and eyed his son with glittering eyes. “Please keep ‘yer mouth shut!”

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Harry spent as much time as he could between classes and Quidditch researching whom Nicolas Flamel was. He even asked for Hermione's help, but didn't tell her what it was for. Harry was as good as his word and didn't pass on what he had learned about Fluffy to his friends or anyone else. But all their research got them nowhere – nothing in contemporary history showed the name that Rubeus had blurted out.

The golden trio spent lovely holidays with their respective families. Aunt Petunia fussed all over Harry, still steaming about the danger Dumbledore had let her nephew get in. He mused that it was a good thing he hadn't mentioned the problem with his broom during Quidditch.

Christmas was a glorious time – Dudley was home from Smeltings, Rubeus and Albus flooded over to exchange gifts, and Harry flooded over to the Weasleys late in the day. Harry gave Dudley a case of chocolate frogs for a gift, which Dudley accepted gratefully. Their card collection was really growing. And Harry got the strangest gift from Grampa Albus – his Dad's old invisibility cloak.

"If I hear one word of you abusing that, boy" Vernon growled playfully "you know I'll have to confiscate it".

"Yes Uncle Vernon" Harry grinned cheekily. "I'll make sure you don't hear a thing."

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Harry and Dudley were lying on bean-bag chairs in their playroom, chatting about school. Dudley had just finished telling him about the wrestling match he won, and they were spending a nice quiet time sorting through the new frog cards. Chocolate frogs were hopping all over the floor – they had ripped open every box in the case just to remove the collectable cards.

"I just wish I could figure out who Nicolas Flamel is" Harry complained. "I have a mystery in the castle – someone is out to get me, and *p*lease don't tell your mum, and I think it has something to do with Flamel, Grampa Albus, and whatever Fluffy is guarding in the castle.

“You don’t know who Nicolas Flamel is?” Dudley gaped at him with an open mouth. He grinned wickedly. “I know something about a wizard you don’t? What’s it worth to you, punk?” The leer that Dudley was giving him was infuriating.

Rising to the bait, Harry grinned evilly back at his cousin. “It’s worth keeping your ugly nose intact!” and he promptly launched himself on top of Dudley, pummeling him playfully. Many giggles and pulled punches later Harry glanced over at him. “Seriously – you know who Nicolas Flamel is? I’ll send you another case of frogs from Hogsmeade if you do.”

“Done!” Dudley cried out excitedly. He rummaged through a stack of cards and tossed one to Harry. “Send the frogs here – I can’t let my mates at Smeltings know about the magical world.” Harry looked at the card Dudley had ‘frisbee’d’ into his lap. It was Nicolas Flamel.

“Nicolas Flamel, Born 1326, not died yet?” Harry read off the back of the card.

“Wicked!” Dudley crowed, reading over his cousin’s back.

“Famous for creating the Philosopher’s Stone?” Harry looked up and met Dudley’s eyes. “What’s the Philosopher’s Stone?”

Dudley shrugged. “That I can’t help you with.” He snatched a frog off the carpet and bit its head off. “Hope that helped you some though.”

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The forest was dark and oppressive. Harry stood between Rubeus and Fang, holding the small lantern and eyed the deep shadows of the woods around them. Fang gave a nervous whine, tail firmly tucked between his quivering legs.

Last night Harry had been caught by Professor Quirrell in the library’s restricted section. He had snuck in under his invisibility cloak, which thankfully he had pulled off and stuffed in his book bag. And while he had succeeded in finding out what the Philosopher’s Stone was, unfortunately he had been discovered and awarded the detention he

was serving now with his father. His classmates were not impressed by the 150 points Quirrell had taken from Gryffindor, either.

“Over here, ‘Arry” his father called. The giant was pointing to the ground and Harry swung the lantern closer for a look. A few drops of silver liquid, almost like mercury, shown on the forest floor. “Unicorn blood, Harry. Some one has seriously wounded a unicorn. Thas a terrible crime.”

Fang couldn’t take the stress anymore. With a howl of fear, the dog bolted down a path, trying to put as much distance between himself and the fearful forest. With a frustrated shout Hagrid chased after his dog, yelling over his shoulder at Harry “Stay right there, ‘Arry. I’ll be right back!”

Great. Harry nervously glanced around the clearing he was in. He wasn’t afraid of the woods – he’d grown up here after all. But nobody in their right mind wanted to stand in the Forbidden Forest after dark. It was forbidden because it was *dangerous*.

A bush in back of Harry rustled suspiciously, causing the young boy to jump. Trying not to show fear, he decided to follow Hagrid for a short ways and move away from whatever was in the shrubbery. But right around the bend the trail forked. Which way did Papa and Fang go? The earth was too firmly packed and dry to show a trail.

With a shrug Harry chose the left branch. He wouldn’t go far – he’d be in shouting distance and he had the light. The path almost immediately opened into a small clearing, slightly recessed and ringed with boulders. And there, on the far side, was the body of the unicorn, gleaming eerily in the reflected lamp light. Catching his breath, Harry realized that a hooded and robed figure was bending over it, drinking blood from the fair creature’s neck.

The mysterious figure heard the boy’s gasp and looked up. Harry couldn’t see the features on its face, but was frozen in fear as the man/creature stepped unsteadily over the dead animal and staggered toward him, lurching as if its legs were on backwards.

“Harry Potter. We finally meet” An unnatural, hissing voice whispered to him, chilling his blood and rooting him to the spot.

A thunder of hooves and crashing of branches and Harry could breathe again. A centaur leapt into the clearing, sailed over Harry's startled head and landed in front of him, rearing up and slashing with his forelegs at the dark figure. The hooded being spun around and escaped into the wood.

The centaur turned around and looked Harry over. "Are you all right, Harry? It's not safe for you in the forest!" The proud figure glanced over at the direction the dark figure had fled to.

"Firenze?" Harry sat down on the floor weak with relief. "Long time no see – how's your mare and foals?"

The centaur smiled down at him. The boy looked a whole lot better than when the giant had him. "Hop on, Harry. Just don't tell Bane. I think you need to ride for a bit." Harry clambered up on Firenze's broad back thankfully. "Maria and the kids are fine – thanks for asking. We have another due when Saturn is at its zenith."

As the strange pair trotted through the wood, Harry gathered his wits back and asked "Firenze – what was that thing?"

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn's blood is used for?" he answered the boy.

"No, er hey! Who said I'm Harry Potter! I'm Harry Hagrid!" He nervously played with the strands of Firenze's mane.

"Your secret is safe with us, young Harry. The stars reveal much." The centaur whispered.

"The stars and my Papa's big mouth" Harry groaned, which was answered with a smile.

"But back to our discussion" the centaur continued. "It is a monstrous thing to slay a unicorn. Only one with nothing to lose and everything to gain would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something so pure and defenseless to save yourself, you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

Harry gaped at the back of Firenze's head. "Who'd be that desperate?" he wondered. "Death would be better than being cursed forever!"

"Yes" the centaur quietly agreed. "But one could consider using the blood if they knew of something else they could use to bring them back to full strength and power once they obtained it." Firenze glanced over his shoulder as they made their way back through the woods. "Mr. Potter-Hagrid – do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?"

Harry gasped with understanding. "The Philosopher's Stone! You make the Elixir of Life with it!"

"And who" the centaur continued, "has been clinging to life, awaiting his chances to return to power?"

Harry was glad he was sitting on Firenze's broad back. He felt positively weak in the knees. "That, that *thing* was Voldemort?"

Firenze stopped in the clearing where Hagrid had left him in the first place. Rubeus ran toward the two dragging Fang in tow, shouting "Arry – you all right?" He lifted him off the centaurs back and crushed him in a hug. And his ribs had just recovered from the last hug.

"I'm fine, Papa. And thanks, Firenze...?" He gawked at where the centaur had stood. Firenze had disappeared silently back into the wood.

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Dear Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon,

I'm sort of nervous and I don't know who to talk to. It feels good to talk to you, even if it's in a letter. Things are really weird at Hogwarts. I think I ran into Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest the other night when I was serving detention. Firenze, a centaur friend of Papa's rescued me. It seems that Voldemort is living a kind of partial life on unicorn blood until he can steal something in the castle that will give him a new permanent body. Wish I killed him proper the first time.

I told Grampa Albus, and he just patted me on the head and said everyone was looking out for me. Then why did he send me out to the forest for detention? It would have been safer to scrub cauldrons in Uncle Sev's dungeons if that's the case.

I think Quirrell knows where Voldemort is, and is trying to help him steal the stone. I wish Grampa or Papa would listen to me. I keep your present, Uncle Vernon, on me at all times.

Love,

Harry

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Harry was a bit of a wreck. He hadn't been sleeping well since the detention in the forest, and could not shake the feeling of impending doom. The pain in his forehead seemed to get worse and worse – especially during his DADA class. His Aunt and Uncle wanted to hire a muggle bodyguard to attend school with him, but Grampa Albus convinced them to leave it in his hands.

It was 2 AM, and Harry gave up trying to sleep. He crept down to the kitchens to get some large beef bones for Fluffy – the elves had served prime rib for dinner, so he was sure he could get something large enough for the cerberus to gnaw on.

The moment Harry crept into the room where Fluffy stayed he knew something was wrong. Instead of the excited whimper of recognition from the three-headed beast, Harry could hear the musical strains of a harp. Yes, there in the corner of the room was an enchanted instrument. And Fluffy was snoring contentedly. Papa must have blabbed to someone how to calm the dog down. He dropped the bones and started to back out of the room.

"Wait right there" a tenor voice, missing the fake stutter spoke out. Quirrell stepped from in back of Fluffy, wand aimed threateningly at Harry. The boy glanced nervously around the room – if Quirrell was here, Voldemort wasn't far behind.

“What do you want, professor?” Harry knew he had to keep him talking. Not talking meant spell-casting, and Harry was no match for his defense teacher. The man in the strange smelly turban came up to him, wand trained on the boy's chest.

“I want you to go down that trap door and fetch something for me, Harry *Potter*” he hissed.

“For you or your boss?” Harry glared at him, fingers itching to wrap around his own wand and hex Quirrell into next week. “And it's Hagrid, not Potter.”

“*Clever. You figured it out, did you?*” A strange nasal, hissing voice sounded from under the defense teacher's turban. Harry glanced in back of Quirrell in astonishment. “*S-s-s-s-show him, s-s-slave.*”

“Yes master”. Quirrell started to unwind his turban with one hand, never moving his wand with the other. Harry did not like where this was going.

Quirrell finished and turned around. There, growing out of the back of Quirrell's head, was an disgusting pink, nose less face -a face of pure evil and malevolence. It glared at him and then smirked a dangerous smile. “*S-s-s-so this is the great Harry Potter? Thought you could hide from me with a new name? I can s-s-sense your pres-s-sence at all times – your name does not fool me. I do not wis-s-sh to risk my s-s-s-servant. You will go down the trapdoor and fetch the Philos-s-sopher's Stone for me.*”

Harry had obediently moved Fluffy's huge paw to the side and opened the door as Voldenmort took forever to hiss out his orders. His snake-like way of talking was more annoying than Quirrell's fake stutter. He figured he had a much better chance of surviving whatever was below than he did against Quirrell. But when Voldemort mentioned the stone, Harry stopped.

“Oh – is *that* what you want?” Harry turned to look at the disgusting duo. “It's not down there – I have it. Grampa Albus gave it to me for safe keeping.”

“Take it from him, s-s-slave” the creature hissed, and Quirrell obediently turned around to face Harry, hand held out demanding. Harry fidgeted in his robe pocket, backing a bit away so the teacher was forced to step closer to the trap door.

He pulled a funny green rock from his pocket – about the size of a goose egg, with a strange texture. Pulling a ring out of the end, he put it firmly in Quirrells waiting hand, and as the dim-witted professor examined it with a puzzled expression, Harry gave him a quick shove down the hole and slammed the door shut. Ten seconds later The-Boy-Who-Lived was rewarded with a muffled BOOM from far below.

“That’ll leave a mark” Harry nodded with a pleased expression. “Thanks for the gift, Uncle Vernon.”

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Harry had considered merely going back to bed and letting Grampa Albus try to figure out what happened to his missing defense teacher, but he couldn’t bring himself to do so. Anyway, this might be a way to make up that unfair 150 points Quirrell had deducted in the first place.

So first thing in the morning Harry approached the Headmaster at breakfast and whispered to him he needed to talk with him. One password of ‘Smarties’ later and he found himself cozy in a chintz chair, sipping tea, and explaining what happened to Quirrell.

Dumbledore paled at the thought of bits of defense teacher splattered against the walls of the chamber, but agreed that Harry had not only acted in self-defense but in the wizarding world’s best interest. He gladly gave back the 150 points to Gryffindor, thereby winning the school cup for Harry’s house. He also agreed to move the philosopher’s stone back to Gringotts.

It was a week later. The students had all returned to their homes, and Harry was back with the Dursleys. Dumbledore was sifting through the pile of mail on his desk. He thought he had escaped another scathing letter from Mrs. Dursley, but it seems that Harry must have confessed to his overly-protective aunt. On his desk lay a thick, padded envelope from her. Checking it for charms, hexes, poisons, and curses, it came up clean.

With a smirk the headmaster ripped the pouch open, only to be surprised by a very loud, very large explosion.

BOOOOOOM!

Muggles might not have howlers, but they do have letter bombs. It would take a long time to grow his eyebrows back. And where did his nose get to?

Chapter 8 – Hagrid and the Chamber of Secrets

Harry was sitting at the kitchen table at the burrow. He was playing exploding snap with Ron, and trying unsuccessfully to flirt with Ginny. Granted he was young and she was younger, but it looked like fun on the telly – the silly bantering and winking between a boy and girl. It was true - he did not have a clue what he was doing.

“Just think, Ginny” he smirked, waggling his eye brows at her. “In a year or two you can come with me to Hogsmede weekends!”

“Ack! Forget it, Hagrid!” Ginny turned her freckled nose in the air and flounced out of the room.

Ron giggled, knowing there was nothing in back of Harry’s harmless flirting. “Give it up, mate. She’s holding out for another Harry.”

“Huh?” the younger Hagrid looked at his friend inquisitively. “What other Harry?”

“Harry Potter” the red-head laughed. “She still carries a torch for the Boy-Who-Lived – hopes he will show up to Hogwarts this year. Thinks they are fated to be together.” He rolled his eyes and reached for another card.

Harry threw his head back and howled with glee. “What if she doesn’t like him once she meets him?” he snickered.

“Meh” Ron shrugged, bored with the subject of girls and their feelings.

‘Ginevra is setting herself up for a lot of disappointment in life’ he mused to himself, watching the discard deck explode.

“Have you seen Dumbledore lately?” Ron suddenly asked him.

“No. Why?” Harry answered, studying his hand of cards.

“Gosh – he must have gotten in a huge fight with a werewolf, banshee, or something powerful. His eyebrows are missing, his face all scarred up, and I heard mum and dad whispering that Pomfrey had to reattach his nose! That must have been some battle.

“Wow!” Harry agreed. “I’d hate to be on the bad side of whoever could do that to Dumbledore!” He smiled to himself. Aunt Petunia had grilled him about the last semester at Hogwarts, and he felt he had to be honest. It served Grampa Albus right – he had put him in danger the whole year. Next time Grampa would screen his DADA teachers a bit better.

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Dudley and Harry escaped the Dursley’s dinner guests. It had been a lovely meal, and the adults were sitting in the parlor digesting and chatting until everyone felt they could hold the lovely cake she had made for pudding.

Harry had snapped on the video machine and the two boys proceeded to start a very violent game involving squirrels and teddy bears wearing camo and fighting a war. The game was just getting good when a soft ‘pop’ was heard and a house elf appeared in the room next to the boys.

“Hi there” Harry said. “Who are you?”

“Duuuh” Dudley gawked.

“Dobby, Sir. I’m Dobby.” The elf looked at Harry anxiously, twisting the edge of the filthy pillowcase he was wearing in a nervous knot.

“Well, Dobby, have a seat. Want some candy or a drink?” Harry gestured kindly to an empty bean-bag. Dobby poked it with amazement on his face and then jumped on it with glee. But the happy look on the elf’s face was quickly replaced by tears.

“T-t-the great Harry Potter offers me a seat and food like any other wizard?” The elf erupted in wails and tears. “Harry Potter is both great and kind!”

“Um, Harry – what is that?” Dudley whispered to his cousin, not taking his eyes off the strange sobbing creature.

“Dobby is a house-elf. They usually work for wizards – have really powerful magic without wands.” Harry eyed Dobby with curiosity. He

didn't know any wizards who owned elves personally, and this elf didn't wear the tea towel of Hogwarts.

"Harry Potter is great and kind and humble! To think he would call house elves powerful! WAAHHHH!" The elf stood in the middle of the beanbag wailing a fountain of tears.

"Er, Dobby, could you lower your voice – my Aunt and Uncle have important guests" Harry patted him on the back nervously, and Dudley offered a sugar quill to the bawling creature. After a few sniffs Dobby settled down in the seat, sucking on the candy quite calmly. "Anyway, Dobby. I'm Harry Hagrid, not Harry Potter."

"We elves know, sir. And we keep secrets. Harry Potter can't come back to Hogwarts. His friends don't like him anymore. Why else would they not write all summer?" The huge bulging eyes of the elf shone shrewdly at the young wizard.

"Um, Dobby, I never noticed that nobody wrote – I've been flooing back and forth between my mate's homes all Summer."

"Harry Potter's muggle home is hooked up to the floo?" Dobby gaped.

"Well, yah! What did you think – I was in jail or something?" Harry laughed at the strange little guy.

"Oh – well here's your letters. I stole them so you wouldn't want to go back to Hogwarts. I'll punish myself now." He got up and proceeded to bang in head on the wall.

"Dobby! Stop that NOW!" Harry grabbed the elf and picked him up, holding him in a bear hug. When the elf stopped struggling he let him go. "Now why don't you want me back in school?"

The elf looked fearfully around the room and dropped his voice to a dramatic whisper. "It's dangerous, Harry Potter sir! I've heard things – there are people who want to hurt you once you get back!"

"Any worse than Voldemort trying to kill me last year?" Harry shrugged with apathy.

“THE GREAT HARRY POTTER IS KIND AND HUMBLE AND BRAAAAVE!” Dobby positively wailed. From down stairs the boys could hear the adults shout up the stairs to turn their telly down lower.

“Shhhhhhh!” they hissed in unison.

“Who’s after me, Dobby? Can you tell me?” Harry spoke in a very low voice in the vain hope that the elf would reciprocate in kind.

“I’s forbidden to say!” Dobby whispered in a conspiratorial voice. “But it’s too dangerous for Harry Potter to return! You have nice family here – stay here, nice and safe!”

“Er, Dobby, I appreciate your concern, but I can’t really skip school.” Harry rolled his eyes at Dudley behind the elf’s lowered head. Dudley mouthed back the word ‘mental’ and Harry nodded in agreement.

“If Dobby smashes pretty cake, Aunt will be so angry she will forbid Harry Potter to go to school!” Dobby gave Harry a sly smile and inched toward the door.

Dudley snorted. “Doubt it – the cake is in the middle of the coffee table where everyone, including two clueless-about-the-magical-world muggles can see it.”

Dobby’s ears drooped. “Please Harry Potter” he looked at the boy with mournful eyes “you mean a lot to the elves. When you killed You-Know-Who as a babe, many bad wizards were arrested which freed their elves – elves that were treated badly. We owe much to the great Harry Potter. Do not put yourself in danger!”

And with a snap of his fingers, the elf disappeared.

“Mental, that one” Dudley stated, picking up his controller.

“Yah” Harry agreed, staring at the seat the elf had been in.

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Diagon Alley was bustling with pre-school shopping. Hogwarts letters had gone out the previous week, and students were crammed in the

streets and stores picking up new robes and school supplies. Harry flooded to the Weasleys for the annual trip, promising to return with a case of chocolate frogs for Dudley. After all there were quite a few cards missing from his collection!

The line for schoolbooks at Flourish and Blotts started at the front of the store and wound clear out the door into the street. Not only were there Hogwarts students of all ages, but many squealing and giggling mothers waiting to get in the store.

“What’s up with that?” Ron glowered at the crowd.

“I’ll never get to browse with the store that crowded” Hermione wailed.

Peering in the window, Molly gasped out loud. “Well, I’ll be! It looks like Gilderoy Lockhart is in there autographing his books! I have several of his on house hold charms and the like!” And to Harry and Hermione’s shock, the Weasley matron started to pat and primp her hair into place. Arthur and the twins just rolled their eyes.

“You must forgive our Mum, Harry” snickered George.

“Yes – she’s quite sweet on Mr. Lockhart” finished Fred.

As the line worked into the store, they had a chance to read the class requirements list posted on the wall. The Weasleys paled a bit – they had four children to buy a complete set of books for. They finally got to the head of the line where Mrs. Weasley fawned all over the famous Gilderoy Lockhart. It would have been a truly disgusting display, except that it gave Harry a chance to pay for everyone’s books before the parents could realize what was happening.

Gilderoy Lockhart. What a pounce. There was no other way to describe the man sitting at the table, autographing his books and eating up the attention from witches and reporters. He wore outlandish pale blue robes with matching hat trimmed in feathers, his teeth were impossibly white and gleaming, and his smile was the product of many hours of practice in front of mirrors. Every man in the room was repulsed. Harry had never met a man more in love with himself.

The long wait through the bookstore did have one high light in the boy's opinion. Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley ended up in a fistfight when the elder Malfoy insulted the used books piled in Ginny's cauldron. Molly was mortified, Ginny embarrassed, and the father of the Weasley clan went up in all his son's estimations on the spot. Good fun.

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Harry, Ron, Fred and George were gaping at the barrier to the Hogwarts Express. Harry was rubbing his nose and examining his glasses for damage, and the twins were taking turns prodding, poking, and hitting the bricks in disbelief. Ron was stuttering and babbling like an idiot.

Somehow, just as Harry was about to push through, the barrier sealed. It was now a normal brick wall, and they had officially missed the train. The four boys stood gaping at each other, overwhelming helplessness dampening even the mischievous twin's normally sunny dispositions.

"At least our trunks and stuff got through" Harry observed glumly.

"What do we do now?" Ron finally spoke. "Mum and Dad appear to be trapped inside. We've missed the express. And I'm hungry!"

Ron and Harry missed the grin that Fred and George exchanged. "Here, Ronnikins, Harrykins. Have some toffee." George brought a small bag out of his pocket.

When Ron and Harry came to, they were in the back of Mr. Weasley's Anglia. Ron rubbed his eyes, and glaring at the two red heads in the front seat screamed "FRED! GEORGE! Mum is going to kill us! You don't have a license!"

Harry groaned. "We are going to be expelled for sure" and he rubbed his head in frustration.

"Nonsense, young Harry" chirped Fred jauntily. "We knocked you out with one of our new inventions – fainting toffees! We kidnapped you,

you didn't have a say. We are always in trouble – they will expect it out of us.”

“Anyway, sit back and enjoy the view” George gestured lazily out the window, other hand firmly on the wheel.

“Um, Ron. Why didn't you tell me your Dad's car can fly?” Harry was gaping out the window, watching the Hogwarts Express puffing below them. Ron flung himself to the window, staring and gasping for breath.

“I didn't know either, mate! We are so in trouble!” Then they looked at each other with a grin. Papa Hagrid would be so jealous – it was just like flying a thestral.

Chapter 9 – Chamber Part Two

Snape was angry. Dumbledore amused. Hagrid looked helpless. Sprout was livid. Harry had never seen the plump and cheerful little Herbology professor so worked up before.

They hadn't *tried* to hit the Whomping Willow. Inexplicably the car started to descend and lose power. It crashed into the angry tree, fell out, forcibly ejected the four stunned boys and careened off into the Forbidden Forest. At least it happened on the schoolgrounds and they didn't have far to walk. What really frosted the boys was that everyone seemed more concerned over the tree than the four of them.

Eventually Ron and Harry were excused to the feast, once it was ascertained that indeed, the two had been drugged and 'kidnapped'. Fred and George, however, were looking at a month of detentions. And a twin howlers at breakfast the next morning. If there is anything worse than a howler, it's two of them screaming in unison.

The twins were sent to start their detention immediately with the new defense teacher, Professor Lockhart. Harry and Ron, feeling guilty and somehow partially responsible, decided to serve with them – for a while at least. To everyone's disgust, the punishment was to help Lockhart with his personal fan mail and correspondence. That consisted of stuffing envelopes with form letters and autographed photos, which the peacock of a man insisted on signing personally while telling the boys all about his fame, fans, and popularity. It was torture.

Three nights into the sentence, and the boys were having a blast messing with the not overly bright professor. Sitting around the man's desk, they were all stuffing envelopes, making sure to grind their thumbs into the photo's smarmy face each time.

"Tell me, Professor Lockhart", George simpered to the man, "how do you get your hair so perfect?"

Hiding a laugh with a cough, Harry attempted to look like he was interested too, flashing puppy-dog eyes at the vain man.

“Well, boys, I’ll tell you a secret” the man smiled widely and gave them a conspiring wink. Ron swallowed hard to keep from losing a good dinner. “I use ‘Gilderoy Lockhart’s NeverMove Hair Potion’! I helped to develop it myself! Keeps your hair firmly in place when battling trolls or fending off amorous veelas.” And he winked again.

It was a week later that Gilderoy Lockhart ended up in the infirmary, head hidden by a towel. Aunt Poppy delighted in telling ‘dear little Harry’ how the fop had somehow found himself with industrial-strength super glue in his Hair Potion bottle, and had not only fused his hair together in very unattractive clumps, but glued his hand down into the mess as well. Professor Snape swore he had no potions to remove the hardened cement, and spells did not work. Professor Snape, however, *did* have a penseive that he was willing to bring out so Poppy could share the memory with Harry, Ron, the twins and himself. The six of them came out of the penseive weeping and weak from hysterical laughter (except for Snape who merely smirked more than usual) at the memory of Poppy having to shear Lockhart like a pastel dressed sheep.

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Dear Aunt Petunia & Uncle Vernon,

Thanks so much for the big bottle of super-glue! It worked perfectly. And thanks, as always, for the yummy cookies. You guys are the best!

Quiddich has been great this year. Nobody had tried to kill me yet. Good thing, because that stupid defense teacher isn’t teaching us anything. How did he ever get the job? I really don’t think he has done any of the things he’s written of in his books. He’s really big on signing autographs – really thinks he’s a ladies man. Can’t do magic to save his life though - I know I had told you before you sent the glue how he tried to heal my arm and removed the bones instead. They still haven’t found who hexed that stupid bludger.

Another prideful git I have to deal with is Draco Malfoy. He’s the only son of a very rich pureblood family, and boy is he full of himself. Thinks he’s all cool and better than everyone. He had the gall to call our friend Hermione a mudblood, which is actually cursing in the

magical world (it means her folks are muggles). We've pretty much become enemies – he hates Hermione because of her parents, he hates me because my papa is half-giant, and he's really jealous because we are seekers on rival teams, and he can't play. His father bought his place on Slytherin's Quiddich team by buying really expensive brooms for the whole team. Ron tried to curse Draco the other day when he was picking on Mione, but Ron's wand is all wonky from an accident that it got broken in. It didn't work too well.

Love,

Harry

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Harry, Ron and Hermione had just left the Halloween feast. "I'm just sorry Dudley can't see the way wizards celebrate" Harry sighed and Ron clapped him on the back in sympathy. They had left the feast before anyone else, planning on leaving a booby trapped jar of men's skin care regimen in Lockhart's quarters.

Halfway to their destination, however, Harry froze, eyes open wide.

"Blood! Kiillll! Mus-s-s-st eat!" A strange hissing voice was coming from the wall, jarring his senses.

"Do you hear that?" Harry cried in alarm, swinging his head back and forth trying to pinpoint where the creepy voice was coming from.

"Hear what, Harry?" Hermione asked, looking at him strangely.

"Yah – I don't hear anything, mate" Ron shrugged, looking at Hermione with worry.

"It's a voice!" Harry said with urgency. "It's going to kill! It's hungry, whatever it is. Here – in this wall!" And he raced down the hall listening intently as he ran. Glancing at each other with concern, his two friends raced after him. The younger Hagrid was so busy listening to the walls, trying to follow the voices; he didn't notice the floors were covered in water in this part of the hall. Hermione and

Ron were lifting their robes to avoid the puddles, when the three of them stopped, gaping at the wall.

Foot-high letters, written apparently in blood, spelled out:

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

HAS BEEN OPENED

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE

“What does that mean?” Ron asked, jaw hanging open.

“Heir of Slytherin?” Hermione pondered.

“Mrs. Norris?” Harry asked, examining the petrified cat hanging from a wall sconce. He didn’t care for the cat particularly, but who would hurt someone’s familiar?

“Hagrid? What are you and your friends doing here?” the gravelly voice of the caretaker Mr. Filch came to their ears. The elderly ragged man came limping toward them. “Did you cause this mess?”

The three Gryffindors stared at the man with fear. “We just found this, Mr. Filch” Harry gasped weakly, gesturing to Mrs. Norris.

“Mrs Norris! Who did this to you?” The man choked out a sob and ran to the petrified cat.

Harry turned with embarrassment from the man’s sobbing and looked up with surprise to see all of the Gryffindors and several professors in a semi-circle around the scene. Some were staring at the three of them with hostile, accusing expressions.

Chapter 10 – Chamber Part Three

It was a serious group of students and teachers gathered in the headmaster's office. Dumbledore had convinced Mr. Filch, who was shaking with emotion that Mrs. Norris was not dead and Professor Sprout would be able to revive the cat once the mandrakes had matured. The Herbology professor and Madame Pomfrey carried the frozen feline to the infirmary to discuss the unusual patient. Left in the office were Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, Mr. Filch and the three students, all of which felt nervous.

The ancient mugwump with twinkling eyes gazed around the group. "Mr. Hagrid, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger? Could you tell us what you were doing in the hall at that time?"

The three of them blushed furiously. They glanced at each other and Harry shrugged. He knew it was useless to lie to Grampa Albus. "We left the feast early to set a prank. We had just happened upon Mrs. Norris a minute before Mr. Filch found us."

"I feel they are telling the truth" the headmaster twinkled at them, "and I sense the prank was not harmful or damaging." Dumbledore could read their thoughts as plain as day, but he wasn't overly fond of Lockhart either.

"I concur, headmaster" the potion master agreed solemnly, giving them a steely look. It wouldn't do to encourage them, though Snape truly wanted to see what the poison-oak infused skin cream would have done to the vain defense professor.

Mr. Filch stood up in a nervous panic of emotion. "But who did that to Mrs. Norris? I want answers! I know Hagrid and his friends wouldn't do that – any Hagrid loves animals. But I want *punishment!*" Tears poured down the old man's face.

"Headmaster?" Hermione asked in a nervous voice, "What is the Chamber of Secrets and the Heir the message talked about?"

"That, my dear Miss Granger, is for another time" the headmaster answered politely but firmly, and gestured them out the door.

“Nobody tells us anything” Harry complained, and his companions nodded in agreement as they trudged down the hall.

True, the general policy of Hogwarts was to keep the children as clueless as possible – mold their pliable little minds into good little ministry citizens with as little as that pesky thinking as possible. But Harry and Hermione had been raised in both worlds, and they were quite capable of thinking. And poking around.

So between poking around, asking teachers and reading ‘Hogwarts: A History’, the trio learned the about the Chamber. It was supposed to be built by Salazar Slytherin, and was reputed to be the home of some horrific monster that would purge the school of mudbloods. Hogwarts had been scanned numerous times and no chamber had ever been found.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting in a sunny window seat one afternoon discussing their favorite subject – the stiff Mrs. Norris and the mysterious message. The school was nervous and jittery – even the great Albus Dumbledore had not been able to reverse whatever had petrified the cat, and poor Mr. Filch had to wait months for the mandrakes to mature. Every child of mixed or muggle parentage was on edge.

“Well, I think this is all very silly” Hermione sniffed. “What monster or beast could live thousands of years besides a phoenix? Phoenixs are creatures of light, so we know Slytherin didn’t have one of those.”

Ron nodded in agreement. “Yah – I’d say the whole thing was a hoax, except for Mrs. Norris being a stiffy.”

Ginny Weasley happened to wander by. She nodded to Ron and Hermione, and turned her nose up at Harry as she passed them. Harry snickered. “Boy, your sister does not like me at all, Ron.”

Ron smirked with a shrug. “Mental. She’s really been acting weird lately too.”

“Water!” Hermione jumped up from the seat.

“Thirsty, Herm?” Harry asked, bewildered.

“No, Harry! Water! The floor was all covered with water when we discovered Mrs. Norris! Why? The out of order girl’s bathroom is right there – it had to come from that bathroom!” She grabbed the two boy’s hands and dragged them down the hall.

Harry thought he knew all the ghosts at Hogwarts, but he was mistaken. Moaning Myrtle was undoubtedly the most obnoxious ghost he had ever met. Whiney, sobbing, sulky – she was a study in self-pity and annoyance. And it was a useless interview – Myrtle had been too busy trying to kill her dead self to know if anyone had been in the bathroom that night.

Although it was early in the school year, it was getting stranger and stranger. Dobby came to visit one night to beg him to leave, which Harry promptly laughed off. Two more school mates and the ghost Nearly Headless Nick were found petrified, with more messages written in blood. The students were now in a state of panic.

Lockhart decided to start a dueling club to give everyone a sense of comfort. It was a joke – nobody thought for a second that Professor Lockhart could duel his way out of a wet paper bag, but the trio decided to attend the first club to amuse themselves.

Harry soon found himself wishing he had gone to the library instead. Lockhart quickly and spectacularly lost to Professor Snape, whom, despite himself, looked pleased at the applause. Gilderoy promptly pulled Malfoy and Harry from the crowd to duel each other. Malfoy grinned a feral smile and proceeded to cast a little-known *serpensortia*, which conjured a hissing black python that came straight for Harry. Harry gazed at the beautiful snake, and in typical Hagrid style, knelt down and said in baby-talk “Oh what a pretty boy you are! You wouldn’t hurt me, would you?”

The snake reared back in surprise. “*No, massster. I do not hurt thossse that ssssspeak.*”

“You speak English?” Harry asked in surprise.

“*No, massster. You ssssspeak parsssel tongue.*” The serpent rolled its eyes.

It was then Harry noticed the *crowd* rearing back in surprise. Evidently he was a parselmouth. Who knew?

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The school was in an uproar yet again. The gift of parselmouth was a rare talent held by none other than Slytherin himself. Rumors flew all over the school – that Harry was the Heir of Slytherin, that Harry could simply speak parseltongue because of Hagrid, or that Harry was possessed. Students gawped and stared at him, whispering and pointing everywhere he went. Harry started to eat in the common room to avoid the Great Hall. *I'm just glad hardly anyone knows I'm really Potter* he mused sadly. *I really hate all this attention.*

Draco Malfoy, who previously had picked on Harry no more than any other non-Slytherin student, now harassed him non-stop. He was furious and jealous that anyone could think the scrawny son of a half-breed oaf could be the heir of Slytherin. As he whined to his father over the floo “Daddy, *I* want to be a parselmouth. It’s not *faaaair!*” No, life isn’t fair - sadly, this was not something galleons could buy for the pampered prince.

Malfoy compensated by telling everyone that *he* was indeed the true heir, and would naturally kill Harry Hagrid for being a pretender. Nobody took this seriously, Harry included. But just to be safe, the trio of friends decided to brew some polyjuice to sneak into the Slytherin common room and see what they could learn. Perhaps Draco’s father was the heir – it couldn’t hurt to find out. The potion was brewed and the Gryffindors disguised as their rivals grilled Malfoy, only to learn that A) Draco wasn’t the heir, B) Draco was clueless about the Chamber, and C), Draco slept with a teddy-dragon. At least the trip wasn’t entirely wasted.

Harry was studying a strange book sitting on the table in front of him. Everyone was enjoying dinner at the Great Hall, and Harry was sulking by himself in the common room. He had just finished a truck-load of homework and felt like taking a break. He didn’t feel like doing anything that would take him near silly gossiping students.

They had found the book sopping wet in Myrtle’s bathroom, where she tearfully told them someone had hit her on the head with it when

they flushed it. The old book was a diary - small with a black cover. It was 50 years old according to the date, and the name in the front cover was "T.M. Riddle". The pages were blank. Why would someone want to flush a blank diary? Ron had recognized the name Riddle as someone who got an award for 'services to the school' or some such nonsense.

The three of them could sense magic coming from the book. Hermione was all for turning it in to a teacher, but Harry wanted to examine it a bit first. Fifty years ago was when the Chamber of Secrets had last been opened. If there was any way to reveal hidden writing in the diary, it might give them a clue who the Heir was/is, and where the Chamber was/is.

A couple of students entered the common room, shot Harry a fearful look, and walked up the stairs. Harry glared at them menacingly. *'If they knew I was really Harry Potter, they'd pee themselves'* he glowered. With a smirk he dipped his quill into his ink and jokingly wrote on the first page *"My name is Harry Potter"*.

The ink immediately faded and bled into the page. To Harry's astonished eyes words started to appear in someone else's writing *"Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?"*

And so they wrote back and forth. Tom immediately brought up the Chamber, which Harry found suspicious. He did learn, however, that Tom was a student when it had been opened, and the 'monster' had attacked several students, killing one. Tom claimed that he, himself, had caught the offending student and got him expelled.

Harry frowned at the book. If the guilty Heir was expelled, then who was he and how was he attacking students now? Tom offered to show him the memory. Harry innocently agreed, figuring it would appear on the pages like a wizard photo or something. Instead, Harry found himself sucked into the pages.

Harry found himself in a pensieve-type state, following a handsome young boy around Hogwarts. He got to see a younger Dumbledore, the previous headmaster Dippet, and listen to Tom try to winge his way into staying at Hogwarts for the summer. But it positively raised

Harry's hackles when Riddle led him to a secret room where Papa Hagrid was feeding a very young Aragog. Riddle promptly fingered his Papa and got him expelled! The very thought that Aragog was the monster would have been laughable, if it hadn't got Rubeus Hagrid expelled and his wand snapped all those years ago!

Harry found himself thrown out of the diary. Either the memory Riddle wished to show him was over, or Harry's anger broke the connection. He picked up his quill and wrote angrily "you are the reason my Papa was expelled? Over Aragog? Are you a moron? Papa isn't the Heir of Slytherin and that silly little closet was no 'Chamber of Secrets!'"

"What do you mean Papa? I thought you said your name was Harry Potter" Tom's writing came back terse and angry.

"I lied, idiot. Harry Potter never showed up at Hogwarts. I didn't know this was an enchanted book and I was fooling around. My name is Hagrid. Harrison Hagrid." Harry wrote his name with a proud flourish and slammed the book shut. He tucked it into his robe – he'd take it to Dumbledore tomorrow and demand his Papa be given his wand back.

The next day Harry went to see his Papa. Without showing him the diary, Harry grumbled that he heard rumors accusing Rubeus of being the Heir. The giant just scoffed with amusement.

"Yah – it hurt back then, 'Arry. Dumbledore – great man – knew I were innocent. The Ministry, however, was right set on blamin' someone. I were the victim.' He sat back with a sad sigh. "Quite silly to think that Aragog could kill and terrorize the students and not be seen. He was about the size of a pony back then!"

Ron came bursting through the door of the hut at that moment. "Harry! Hagrid! They got Hermione! And, and – Ginny is missing! He promptly broke into tears.

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The two boys were visiting their friend in the infirmary. Hermione lay in the bed, stiff as a board, frozen in place. In one hand she clutched a small hand mirror, the other hand clenched in a fist. Harry had

never felt so helpless in his life. Ron was gently sobbing – the loss of his best friend and now his sister being missing and possibly dead had him in pieces.

“Harry – what is that?” Ron picked at something in the petrified girl’s hand.

“It looks like some paper, Ron” Harry tugged and pulled.

It was a scrap of parchment on which Hermione had obviously written some notes to herself. Harry read it out loud. “Basilisk, Kills with its look. Reflection will petrify. Pipes – Myrtle’s bathroom?” He looked up stunned at his friend.

“That’s it! The entrance to the Chamber is in Myrtle’s bathroom!” Ron cried. “Quick – let’s get a teacher!”

“Better than that” Harry grinned. “Let’s get my Papa – he will know how to get around a Basilisk, and I’m sure he could use some revenge!”

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Harry, Ron and Hagrid found themselves in Myrtles bathroom. Hagrid, who had no idea the ghost of his former classmate was there, enjoyed chatting with her briefly. They found she was quite amused over the thought of Hagrid being the Heir. “I would think I’d know if a giant came into the girl’s room” she sniffed. “I could hear a boy’s voice over by the sinks, and he was hissing or something. But it certainly wasn’t Hagrid. I’d be able to see his head over the door of my stall, wouldn’t I?”

“Boy Hagrid – you really got the hose-job didn’t you?” Ron quipped as the three of them examined the sinks.

“Arry – over here!” his father called to him. Pointing to the side of the faucet, Harry could make out the etched image of a snake.

“Talk to it, Harry – Myrtle said she heard hissing!” Ron was all excited and worried about his sister.

“Um, open up please Mr. Evil Heir?” Harry blushed, talking to the faucet.

Ron popped him in the back of the head. “In parsel, stupid!”

Rubbing the back of his head, Harry shot him a look. Staring at the snake image, he hissed out *“either open or eat Ron.”*

To Harry’s astonishment, the sink started to slide open. It stopped to reveal a dark and slimy tunnel. The three of them gaped at each other for a moment, then Harry shrugged and jumped into it. He didn’t care for Ginny, but he didn’t want her held in some madman’s grasp.

Ron hesitated for just a moment and followed. Rubeus yelled down the hole “are you boys all right?” He heard their assurances echoing back up. “Hang tight, wands ready – I’m going for some more help. DON’T LOOK IT IN THE EYES!”

Harry and Ron found themselves in a room full of rat bones. “Oh ick” Ron groaned, looking around. The red-head started playing with a huge sheet of translucent paper. “What’s this then?” he asked, looking it over.

“Um – that’s a snake skin, Ron” Harry glanced over. He was exploring a bit by the light of his wand.

“How big is a bloody basilisk, Harry?” Ron paled, looking the skin over with fresh respect.

“Oh – about 60 ft full grown” Harry answered, distractedly. He found a door with iron snakes cast into the front. He might just learn to hate snakes before this adventure was over. “Ron – wait here for my dad. I’m going to look for Ginny – I don’t think we should both risk ourselves. If you hear any really big slithering sounds, try to crawl back up the tunnel. If it swallows me I don’t think it can fit back up that hole.”

That didn’t make Ron feel real comfortable, but he agreed and sat on a chunk of stone for a good wait.

“Open” Harry hissed in parseltongue and it worked on the door also. “*Not terribly imaginative*” he pondered, “*but at least it works.*”

He tiptoed into a huge chamber, black stone columns supporting the ceiling, and a huge statue of a face in the far end. Harry realized with a start he could see the room because there were lit torches. Lit torches usually meant people, so Harry moved slowly and cautiously.

“Hello, Hagrid. You don’t look much like your father” the smarmy voice of young Tom Riddle called to him from next to the statue. Harry gaped – what was the punk from the diary doing here and why was he semi-transparent. Then he noticed Ginny’s unconscious form lying on the ground by Riddle’s feet. He ran to her and was relieved to feel a pulse.

“Yes, she’s alive” the boastful boy mused, “but not for long.”

“What do you mean?” Harry hissed in anger.

“Poor little Ginny Weasley. All alone at Hogwarts – youngest of seven kids, use to having all the attention. She finds my diary and now has a best friend to talk with. How incredibly boring” Riddle drawled. “I suffered for hours of ‘ooh – why doesn’t Harry Potter show up – I know we were meant for each other’ and ‘ooh – my dorm mates are such snobs’ boo hoo. Ack!”

Harry had to agree – it did sound pretty nauseating.

“Anyway, I had to listen to her drabble to get control of her mind” Tom snarled. “Just about drove me nuts.”

“Huh?” Harry asked stupidly.

“You are as brainless as your father, Harry” Tom glared. He wrote out the name ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle’ in the air with flaming letters traced out with his finger. With a gesture, the letters rearranged to spell ‘I Am Lord Voldemort’.

“Oh my giddy aunt...” Harry started to back away.

Riddle smirked at the slowly retreating boy. “Yes – I’m Voldemort. I hid a portion in my soul in my diary to give me a way to return if I ever needed to. It sounds that I need to, since Harry Potter did me the disservice of separating me from my body 13 years ago. By gaining control over Miss Weasley here, I can use her life force to make this form permanent.”

Harry blinked. Sure enough, Ginny was looking weaker and Tom was looking more solid. And more smug. Harry decided it was a real good idea to wipe the smirk off the kid’s face. He started forward again, hands clenched into fists, when Riddle laughed at him.

“Oh dear – you don’t really think I’m going to fight you myself, do you?” he laughed again. “Let me introduce you to my pet. And don’t bother talking to him in parseltongue – he obeys me.” Tom hissed at the statue and a door slid open. Harry didn’t bother with his ego – he turned and ran.

“Arry?” Hagrid shouted into the room.

“Papa – RUN!” Harry shot past him. “The basilisk is coming!”

“Oh – I gotta see!” Hagrid crooned like it was a kitten. The giant reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. Muggle sunglasses.

“What are you doing, Pop?” Harry shouted at him. “RUN!”

“Nonsense, ‘Arry! These’ll do the trick just fine! They have UV protection!” Hagrid strode straight up to the giant snake. Harry squeezed his eyes shut, shaking like a leaf and whimpering for his father. Fighting all instinct, he watched the flickering shadow cast by his father and the snake. Hagrid walked right up to the basilisk, talking baby talk and telling it how cute it was. The serpent reared back and Hagrid hugged it.

“Who’s a cute little snakey!” he cried with glee, squeezing it with excitement. Harry heard a loud ‘snap’ and the snake collapsed. He spun around in hopeful shock. The basilisk laid dead – the victim of a Hagrid hug. Tom Riddle/Voldemort stood there, in stunned disbelief.

“You killed my basilisk, you oaf!” Riddle screamed at the giant, spit flying with frustration.

“Er, sorry about that” Hagrid muttered sheepishly. “She was a beaut.”

Harry, however, lost no time. Running up to Riddle and Ginny, he pulled the diary out of his robe and dropped it to the ground. He also pulled out muggle matches and a can of lighter fluid.

“What is that?” Riddle sneered at the boy.

“It was going to be used on Lockhart’s portraits” Harry shrugged. “It’s now going to be a bonfire.” And he promptly dosed the diary and set it on fire.

“NOOOOOOOOO” screamed the ghostly Riddle. As the book burned, Tom screamed and faded, finally disappearing.

Ginny blinked and opened her eyes. “Harry Potter” she moaned in delirium. “I knew you’d come and rescue me.”

“Er, um, Ginny – wake up” Harry gently patted her face a few times while his father looked at him in confusion. Harry shook his head at him to convey that Ginny didn’t know his real identity. “Sorry Gin – it’s me – Harry Hagrid.”

She snapped her eyes open with a start. “Hagrid?” she screeched, “Put me *down*!”

Harry shrugged and dropped her in a large slimy puddle. She sputtered and yelled “are you just going to leave me here? And if you ever tell anyone what I said, I’ll bat bogey you into next week!”

“Your secret is safe with me, Gin” Harry smirked at her.

Hagrid bent down and scooped the girl up. “I’ll get you, Miss Weasley” he laughed, winking at his son.

“Thank you *Professor* Hagrid” she simpered, shooting one last dirty look at Harry, who was ready to bust a gut. The threesome walked back to where Ron waited.

Ron was sitting on the same rock. He jumped up to hug Ginny, who promptly burst into tears. Next to him resting on a large pile of rat bones was a very dippy looking Gilderoy Lockhart. Well, dippier than normal. "Do I know you?" Lockhart asked with a goofy grin.

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked at Ron, who shrugged. "He gave a big long-winded speech about how he was going to obliviate everyone's memory once you guys rescued Ginny so he could take credit for it and write his next book. He shot the hex at me, and I held up the mirror we brought to watch for the basilisk with. It bounced back and got him. I think he rather over did the hex."

"Too bad Papa here killed the basilisk" Harry sighed. "We could have fed him to the snake."

"Now, how do we get out of here?" Hagrid scratched his shaggy head and peered up the pipe. At that moment Dumbledore, looking smug and suspiciously like he knew everything that was going on, appeared in a flash with Fawkes the phoenix.

"Ah – Professor Hagrid, Mr. Hagrid! Mr. And Miss Weasley? I'm glad everyone seems to be all right" the headmaster twinkled at them. Harry really hated it when he did that.

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It was a strange group that met in the headmaster's office. Mr. And Mrs. Weasley were there sobbing over their daughter who took turns eating up the attention and glaring at Harry. Harry explained how they figured out it was a basilisk and how they found the chamber. Papa Hagrid explained that he got Dumbledore before joining them, and Lockhart had overheard them and planned on grabbing the glory for himself. Dumbledore, however, didn't explain what took him so long to show up.

Lucius Malfoy, father of Draco, barged in half way through the conversation to demand Dumbledore's resignation. Harry was surprised to see Dobby with the man, and it was obvious that the poor elf was owned by the abusive aristocrat. Malfoy was less than pleased to hear that the basilisk and Riddle were both dead. He was

even more unhappy when Harry accused him to his face of giving Ginny the diary, and offered to gut him like a fish.

Dobby had enough. With a screech of elvin rage, he snapped his fingers and body slammed the snob across the room. Lockhart looked at Lucius, giggled and obliviated Malfoy for good measure. He wasn't sure why he did it, but it seemed like a natural spell for him. Lucius sat there smiling and drooling next to his new best friend.

Everyone gaped at Dobby. He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, everyone thinks I'm a bit insane anyway, so I figured I could get away with it. Are you hiring, headmaster?" Dumbledore twinkled and transfigured the Malfoy pillowcase into a Hogwarts uniform for the elf, who swaggered out of the office.

"I don't understand how Harry could speak parseltongue, though" Molly Weasley frowned.

"Oh – thas easy" Hagrid grinned. "You-Know-Who must have transferred that ability to him when he gave 'im his scar." Hagrid turned pale, realizing what he just said. "Oh – I shouldna said that!"

Harry groaned. Ron looked at him in shock. Ginny jumped out of her dad's lap and threw herself at him. "Harry! I've always loved you!"

Harry dropped her for the second time that night. "Hagrid to you, dear. I'm just Harry Hagrid." And he stormed out of the office in a huff.

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As much as Harry didn't want the world to know, it now did. Ginny was telling everyone and everything Harry's true identity. Everyone was gaping and staring at him in the school. At least it wasn't with hostility now – he was a hero for defeating Voldemort, and his Papa was a hero for defeating the basilisk. And sadly, Harry was now The-Boy-Who-Lived.

Papa's expulsion was revoked and he was given permission to buy a new wand. Harry was thrilled for his father, though still a little cheesed off him for spilling the beans about his identity. Oh well – he was looking forward to a summer away from the wizarding world.

Both Lockhart and Malfoy were sent to St. Mungos to try and correct their missing memories. Harry wished them both a painful and slow recovery.

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Dumbledore was opening the mail in his office. Ah – a nice package from the Dursleys. No doubt they were sending him a thank you gift for allowing Miss Weasley to tell everyone that Harry was related to them, and not Hagrid. They were such nice people.

It wasn't thanks on Petunia's mind when she made Dumbledore's 'present'. How could a headmaster allow hexed bludgers, basilisks, and idiot teachers like Lockhart into the 'safest place in the wizarding world?'

KABOOMMMM!

The headmaster had opened the box and it exploded. Spectacularly. And he had just grown back his eyebrows...

Chapter 11 – Prisoner of Azkaban

The summer was great so far. Papa Hagrid on his first weekend came to tell Harry how someone had caught Dumbledore unaware with a vicious exploding hex, and the poor headmaster had to have his nose re-attached yet again. And his eyebrows were burnt off - again. Harry snickered to himself - again.

Harry had brought home gifts for everyone this year – a beautiful gem-encrusted pendant of a lily he found in his vault for Aunt Petunia, who accepted it with tears in her eyes, and a case of chocolate frogs for Dudley. (When they were in private he also gave Dudley a naughty picture book he found in the adult section of Florish & Blotts. The moving pictures impressed his cousin to no end.) And Vernon was most thrilled with the ‘stick thingy’ hidden in a cane Harry gave him. The cane was topped with a beautiful silver serpent’s head, and Vernon thought it was the most unique and classy thing he had ever seen. Harry figured that Malfoy would never miss it – he still hadn’t found his memory at St. Mungos and remained a babbling drool-monkey. It wasn’t Harry’s fault it had been left in the Headmaster’s office for anyone to claim.

Aunt Marge was coming to visit for a couple weeks. “Now boys” Vernon lectured, lining them up in the playroom, “I expect you to be on your best behavior. I want you to help walk Ripper for her.” The boys held their hands out and Vernon placed a pound note in each expectant palm.

“I expect you to be polite and help with the dishes and chores” he continued. The hands remained out and he placed more cash in them.

“And I expect you to allow her to kiss you and pinch your cheeks” he finished. The hands were held higher for that one. Vernon snickered and put a 20 in each palm. The boys really did earn it for that.

Dudley and Harry grinned at each other. They adored Aunt Marge – she was rough, vulgar, and foul mouthed. She had no patience with pretension or silly expectations. Aunt Marge was cool.

“Harry dear – mail!” Petunia called from the front hall. Harry raced down stairs to collect a rather thick envelope, which he tore open with curiosity

“What is it, cos?” Dudley asked, chewing the head off a wiggling chocolate frog, much to his mother’s disgust.

“Whaaaat?” Harry was gaping, and collapsed in a chair. His family gathered around.

Harry read the letter from his friend Hermione out loud while his family passed around an article from the Daily Prophet. It turned out that Sirius Black, a notorious criminal, had escaped from Azkaban, the wizard prison. Nobody had ever escaped before, and the aurors were clueless how this had been accomplished. But the worst part of all was that evidently Sirius Black was Harry’s godfather, and Fudge felt that he had escaped to kill Harry.

“Why would he want to kill me?” Harry gasped. “This guy killed 14 muggles, some wizard named Peter Petegrew, and evidently betrayed my parent to Voldemort. And why do I have to learn about this from the Daily Prophet?”

“Time for target practice, boys” Vernon growled dryly.

“Time to mail Dumbledore” screeched Petunia. “What else has he not warned us about?”

But Harry tuned it all out. Black. Sirius Black. That name sounded familiar – but where. “I got it!” he shouted and dashed up the stairs to his bedroom. Dudley looked at his folks confused, and ran after Harry.

Harry was sitting on the floor of his room, frantically rummaging through an old wooden box.

“What’s that, Har?” his cousin asked.

“Got it! Sirius didn’t betray my parents!” He waved a handful of parchment wildly in the air.

“Wuh?” Dudley gaped at his jumping and dancing cousin.

“Right here – letters from my folks right before they died – I found them in my bank vault. They say that Sirius was not the secret keeper – the guy who could blab to Voldemort where they lived. Peter Pettegrew was! They arrested the wrong guy!”

“Wow, Harry. What are you gonna do?” Dudley breathed in awe. Smeltings was so boring compared to his cousin’s life. Harry shook his head in a daze.

Aunt Marge chose that moment to ring the bell. It was chaos for a bit as her dog Ripper jumped on everyone with loud barks and wet dog kisses, and she jumped on everyone with loud shouts and wet aunt kisses. She eyed Harry after hugging her nephew Dudley.

“You’re looking good, boy” she growled, and pinched his cheek. “Where do you go to school again?”

“St. Brutus” he smirked at her, rubbing his face to get the circulation back.

Aunt Marge gave a snort and cuffed him one. “Seriously” she said.

“Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry” he shrugged, knowing she would take it as another joke.

“Oh – you’re a wizard then? Good – keeps you out of trouble” she nodded in approval, bending down to give Ripper a treat. “What house are you in?”

The Dursleys and Harry all stood shock still and stared at Marge, mouths hanging open stupidly. “You know about the magical world, Marge?” Petunia finally spit out.

“Yes, yes – I’m a witch myself. Went to Hogwarts 1960-67. Vernon is so much younger than me, our folks decided to not bother telling him.” She sat down heavily in a chair. “Boys – would you take my suitcases upstairs please?”

Harry and Dudley shut their mouths long enough to nod and grab the luggage. “You are in my room, Aunt Marge” and he made his escape, shaking his head.

The boys returned a few minutes later to find the adults crowded around the dining table studying the Daily Prophet and Harry's letters from his parents vault. Marge looked up at Harry and patted him on the head. "So you're really Harry Potter. Rumph." She gave Petunia a frustrated look. "If you had ever talked about your sister, I would have recognized the name Potter and been able to get Harry to you sooner."

"Er, well, I..." Petunia sputtered with a touch of embarrassed anger.

"Um, Aunt Marge – its ok" Harry broke in to break up the tension. "I love Papa Hagrid – he's affectionate and loyal – I had a good childhood. I'm just really, really grateful to be a Dursley too!"

"Right then" Marge looked him up and down approvingly. "You are correct – by your parents letters it's obvious that Sirius was not the secret keeper, and Pettigrew betrayed your folks. I thought the case was fishy at the time – they jailed him without a trial, and he demanded veritaserum, which was denied. Very fishy" she nodded.

She turned and looked at her dog. "Ripper – bring me my handbag, would you duck?" Ripper stood up, yawned, and trotted to the parlor to fetch the requested purse. Dudley and Harry just gaped.

"Ripper is your familiar!" Harry grinned. "Boy you *are* cool, Aunt Marge."

She winked at the boys and drew out a wand. "OK, Harry – do you know how to summon the Knight Bus?" The puzzled look on Harry's face gave her the answer. "No matter – I'll take you to the ministry. It's time you met our esteemed minister, Cornelius Fudge. He's a spineless fool – he will get the aurors off of your godfather's back if you threaten to expose this to the public."

"Ooooh – are you going near Diagon Alley?" Dudley jumped up and down. "Bring me some more chocolate frogs!"

"You like those things?" Marge gave a loud, unfeminine laugh. "I'll buy them for you then! It will be my pleasure." She grabbed Harry, transfigured his jeans into robes, and dragged him out the front door to catch the bus, Ripper in tow looking decidedly amused.

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It was a wild afternoon. The Knight Bus was insane – Harry and Ripper loved it, though Aunt Marge took several opportunities to scream at Ernie about his driving. She also whacked poor Ernie with her purse to drive her opinions home, which made the ride all the more exciting.

Aunt Marge was right - Minister Fudge was, indeed, a fool. Blustering, pomp and vain, he was at first thrilled to meet The-Boy-Who-Lived, hoping for public backing from the young celebrity. Harry, on the other hand, instantly disliked the man. After a long talk, Fudge made copies of Harry's papers and promised that if caught, Sirius Black would indeed get a fair trial as long as Harry promised to keep it out of the papers.

By the end of the week Ripper found Sirius in his dog-animagus form lurking around Privet Drive. He was brought home, cleaned up, brought to Fudge and pardoned. The Dursleys kindly invited him to move in for a while until he could recover from his time in prison. Aunt Marge left to go back home to the rest of her bulldogs. Dudley and Harry would miss her.

Although it was exciting at first to share your room and home with an ex-convicted murderer, and it was neat to find you had a godfather you never knew existed, Harry soon grew tired of living with Sirius. The man wanted to talk to Harry hour after hour about James Potter and the Marauders. And though it sounded way cool to be part of a gang of avid pranksters, Sirius expected Harry to be James Jr for him. Harry had never even heard of his birth father and mother until two years ago – he was grateful to the Potters, but in honestly, Papa Hagrid was his father, and the Dursleys were his parents. And though it sounds neat to be able to talk to an adult about school days, there is always something creepy about a person in their forties who refuses to grow up.

Sirius was also a pureblood wizard who was totally clueless about the muggle world. Wandless, he felt frustrated and vulnerable. He was used to house-elves picking up after him, cooking for him, and cleaning for him. Petunia and Vernon were getting frustrated with

trying to teach him how to use a hamper, shave himself with a razor, or any of the countless tasks muggles take for granted.

So it was with deep joy that a month later Harry heard Sirius casually mention he owned a home in London. Dudley and Harry traded meaningful looks. "Can we visit your home, Sirius?" Harry begged with puppy-dog eyes.

Sirius Black, who was completely unable to deny his god son anything when his huge green begging eyes were deployed, readily agreed and brought Dudley and he to visit Grimmauld Place.

Grimmauld Place was a pig sty for dark wizards. It was dirty, creepy, and unwelcoming. Sirius' mum had a portrait by the front door, and she would scream and yell like a banshee at anyone who came near. The mounted heads of ex-house elves decorated the hall. The door knobs looked like snakes, the portraits all leered and snickered at you, and there was an amazing collection of magical creatures living throughout the abandoned home. It was quite unlivable.

So Harry and Dudley snuck out of Privet Drive the next day and caught the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley. There Harry hired a witch interior decorator to totally refurbish Grimmauld Place. The work was done a week later, and Sirius, delighted with the fresh new décor, thanked the Dursleys for their hospitality and moved back to his ancestral home. Much to everyone's relief.

Harry was sad to see the summer end, and watched Dudley prepare for Smeltings with more than a little longing. "Wish I could go with you, Dud" he sighed as he started to build a card-castle out of extra chocolate frog cards.

"You're kidding" Dudley snorted. "You are famous; you can do magic and see all kinds of neat stuff I can't – why would you want to leave that?"

Harry knocked the cards over and lay on his cousin's bed, staring at the ceiling. "I can't say I really like the magical world all that much, Dud. Someone is always trying to kill me. My Papa is great, but he wasn't really all that good of a father – I was always getting beat up by his animals. I never know what is going on because Dumbledore

keeps everything all mysterious and secretive.” He rolled over with a sigh. “I hate being famous.”

Dudley sat on his trunk to latch it and gaped at his cousin. “You hate being famous. Well, I’ll trade you!”

“You can have it, Dud.” Harry laughed, but quickly grew serious. “It’s not fun at all. Ever since Papa opened his big mouth, everyone is always staring at me, pointing, asking for my autograph. Girls are all over me, and trust me – it’s not that fun. They are all possessive and jealous and junk. I can’t get rid of Ginny now – she hated my guts until she found out I’m The-Boy-Who-Didn’t-Bloody-Die-By-Nothing-He-Did-Consciously and now she stalks me everywhere. Ron and Hermione don’t look at me the same anymore. Half of Slytherin wants to kill me personally. It really stinks.”

“Gosh, Harry” Dudley gave him a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry – I didn’t think it would be a drag. Can’t you quit or something?”

“I dunno” he sighed sadly. “Uncle Sev explained to me that Voldemort isn’t really dead. Sev used to be one of his followers and turned spy for Dumbledore. He has the dark tattoo that Voldemort use to call his Death Munchers with. He told me that if Moldyshorts was really dead, the tattoo would disappear.”

“Well, that sounds like a great reason to not go back!” Dudley sputtered.

“It’s not that easy” Harry groaned. “Dumbledore told me there was a prophecy made before I was born. I’m the only one who can kill Voldemort for good. So when he shows up again, it’s gotta be me. I’d like to make sure my Papa, Sirius, and my friends are safe before I quit.”

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Petunia and Vernon were lying in bed after a busy day of dropping Dudley and Harry off at the train station for their respective journeys back to school. Tears slowly dripped down her cheeks, and Vernon glared at nothing in particular.

"I can't believe what that Dumbledore has done to our boy" she hissed in frustration. "Telling a mere child that he has to kill the world's most powerful dark wizard, but not telling him how or training him!" Vernon glowered in agreement.

"I'm glad Dudders told us – Harry never wants to burden anyone" the man growled. "Now that his idiot father let slip his identity, and Dumbledore decided it was cute to let everyone know, his life has got to be torture at that school."

"To think I almost felt guilty for sending those letter bombs to him. Now I wish I'd made them stronger!" Petunia wept. "How are we going to protect Harry?"

Chapter 12 – Back to School

Back to Hogwarts. Harry gave a deep, heartfelt sigh as strode across the lawn. Perhaps Dudley was right – maybe he should just leave and let the wizards sort their own messes out. What had they ever done for him? The welcoming feast was tasty as ever, and it was entertaining to see how poorly attached Dumbledore's nose was at this point. Pomfrey did manage to get it back on his face, but it wasn't very straight or lined up quite right.

He was slowly walking down the hill for his first Care of Magical Creatures class. Harry swelled with pride when he learned his Papa was now a professor – Rubeus had intentionally not told him so he could surprise him with it. He clasped the wriggling text book, firmly tied shut, against his body and smiled in greeting as his father met his eyes.

Harry coolly ignored Draco's taunts as he took his place by the fence next to his childhood home. He scratched Fang behind the ears and nodded to Ron and Hermione as he gazed around the corral. There were four hippogriffs standing around with a strange combination of pride and nervousness. Rather a high-strung creature to have around third years, Harry pondered.

Class was exciting in that he got to ride Buckbeak. Malfoy, in a fit of jealousy, sauntered right up to the hippogriff and ignored all the protocol, and proceeded to insult the beast. Malfoy was rewarded with a sharp slash to his arm, which he handled with crying, screaming, and threats.

"You should have ate him, Beaky" Harry mumbled giving the creature a pat on the neck.

Dear Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon,

One of Papa's hippogriffs just slashed Malfoy. Draco deserved it – he teased it and insulted it right after learning about how to never do so. But the ministry wants to investigate and maybe even have Buckbeak put to death. I don't think that's fair – Buckbeak was just being a hippogriff, and he only scratched Draco. The way he's carrying on though, you would think he lost his arm or something.

Could you please send me 50 boxes of black hair dye? That should do a full-grown hippogriff. The ministry is stupid – they would never check for muggle hair dye. I'll pay you back the next time I get to the bank.

Thanks!

Love,

Harry

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Two nights before the ministry was to arrive to investigate the hippogriff Buckbeak, Harry, Ron, and Hermione snuck out to the corral and dyed the animal black. It wasn't the easiest thing to do, and feathers do not take dye the same way hair does, but it worked. By morning Buckbeak was 'missing' and a black and murky gray hippogriff had joined the herd.

The ministry officials were furious. They checked each hippogriff for charms, transfigurations and appearance altering potions, but everything came up negative. The gray hippogriff was not one of four in the corral as far as the Ministry could tell. They left with serious threats to keep the beasts away from students under sixth year, and to let them know immediately if the criminal Buckbeak ever showed up. He didn't for a few years – that's how long it take a hippogriff to completely molt and shed.

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Harry sat glowering in the DADA classroom. Just what he needed – another Marauder in his life. Remus Lupin was nice enough, and his classes were both entertaining and educational, but Harry could see the look in his eyes every time he looked at him. Harry was Son-Of-James Potter – not Harry. Oh for the good old days when he was simply Harry Hagrid.

There was something off about Remus that Harry couldn't put his finger on. The man was a contradiction of strength and weakness – power seemed to radiate from the man at times, but in the same

respect he was always sickly and missing from classes quite often. He was intelligent, well spoken, and cultured, yet wore the shabbiest robes Harry had ever seen. Even Hermione could tell the man was hiding something.

But no matter what Harry felt about his new defense teacher, it was nothing compared to the loathing he felt for his Divinations professor, Sibyll Trelawney. The woman was a complete and total nutter. Last year was bad enough – putting up with her nasty incense and ‘oooh I’m so mysterious’ routine – but she at least had ignored Harry completely. But ever since it got out that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived, Trelawney was determined to make him out to be the Boy-Who-Won’t-Live-Much-Longer.

He was sitting in Divinations on a very uncomfortable pouf glaring into his tea cup. Trelawney, blinking her huge bug-like eyes, had walked by him three times already – clucking her tongue and murmuring nonsense like “poor dear” and “such a sweet boy”. Hermione was patting him on the arm and Ron trying not to snicker to help keep him calm. Harry was one prediction away from grabbing a crystal ball and stuffing it in a place it was never meant to be hidden.

Dear Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon,

Could you please send me a pair of those gag hologram glasses from the joke shop in Little Whinging? I need to enhance my Divination teacher’s glasses – I think she needs the gift of seeing auras.

Thanks!

Love,

Harry.

Though Hermione tried to lecture Harry what he did ‘wasn’t nice’, she had to admit that it was far more pleasant to hear how all the students of Hogwarts were suddenly blessed with such ‘happy auras’, instead of how all of them were going to die.

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Christmas was interesting, to say the least. Harry had spend a couple days with Sirius at Grimmauld place, and decided that even though it was a pain to be expected to be the incarnation of your dead dad that you've never met, it was cool to have a rich godfather. Rich and generous. Rich, generous, and a great prankster. They did share a great time laughing over Trelawney's new 'gift' in seeing auras.

Harry spied a rat in his godfather's kitchen one morning, so he took it upon himself to run out to muggle London and buy some rat poison. The next morning the bewildered men found Kretcher, the insane and nasty house-elf, dead in the parlor. Apparently he thought the rat poison, in a box clearly marked 'Rat Poison', was a tasty breakfast cereal. Kretcher wasn't a terrible loss in either man's opinion, though they hadn't wished him dead. Dobby was more than happy to take his place.

But that wasn't the strangest thing they found. Evidently the rat the men had spotted in the kitchen was Peter Pettegrew, who had been spying on them. And being a wizard, had never seen muggle rat poison before. Obviously he had felt peckish during the night and decided to have a snack. They found his cold, stiff body in the kitchen next to the stove – transformed back into a man, but with all four arms and legs in the air like the rat he was.

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The rest of the school year went almost smoothly. Although Voldemort didn't try to kill him this year, Remus Lupin turned out to be a werewolf and almost did one night when Harry was visiting his Papa during the full moon. It would have been nice if the Headmaster had warned the students not to leave the castle during that time of the month...

But Uncle Sev had saved him. He was angry that Dumbledore allowed a werewolf at Hogwarts and felt that something like that would happen, and had been keeping a sharp eye out. Remus felt so terrible the next day he resigned on the spot and went to live with Sirius.

As the year drew to an end, Harry found himself drawn more and more to home. Not Hagrid's hut, but his real home – the Dursleys.

Home, where he felt safe and protected. Home where adults fought fiercely to keep him out of harm. Home, where the cookies were hot and chewy and his bed soft, warm, and flea-free. Home, where his aunt and uncle hugged and kissed him, and his cousin played with him and everyone made him feel loved and wanted for being simply himself.

So it was on the last Divinations class of the year that Harry, Ron, and Hermione found themselves the last ones leaving the room. Harry looked back to sneer at Trelawney and stopped dead in his tracks. Trelawney was standing stiffly, eyes glazed and mouth open. A strange voice started to come from her mouth as the three students stood gaping at her.

“The one with the power...”

“Oh no! Not this time!” Harry grabbed Ron’s and Hermione’s arms and all but pushed them down the trap door.

“What was that all about!” Ron gaped up at the ladder.

“She was making a real prediction for once” Harry growled, walking away. “I for one, want to make sure nobody hears it!” His friends shrugged in agreement and followed him out of Hogwarts.

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Dear Dumbledore,

I don’t know who decided you were qualified to lead a school. You are a fool and an idiot. First of all, how can you approve hippogriffs as a subject for third years? I’m amazed that only one child got slightly injured. Those are highly dangerous creatures. Hagrid is a nice guy, but he’s much larger and stronger than the students and has no clue what is safe and what isn’t. Can’t you insist on clearing his subject matter before a child does get seriously hurt?

Secondly, where did you ever dig up Sybill Trelawney from? I’ve heard all about the fraud from Sirius, Marge, and Harry. A teacher that makes a career out of predicting impressionable children’s deaths? And she singles out Harry all the time for her gruesome

fantasies? Harry will not be taking Divination until you can find a real teacher for the subject.

Lastly, a werewolf for a teacher? I don't care how qualified the man is! If you must use bloodthirsty out of control monsters to teach children, can't you lock them up during the full moon or something? When Harry told us Professor Snape had to save his life because nobody bothered to mention there was a werewolf running around the grounds, we just about hit the roof. I swear if Harry gets killed or seriously injured at your laughably safe school due to your incompetence, we will find Hogwarts ourselves, wards or no, and kill you with our bare hands.

Hatefully,

The Dursleys

Albus read the letter and chuckled. Ah yes, Harry did have a talent for inspiring loyalty – he had the muggles wrapped right around his finger by the look of it. At least Petunia didn't send one of her 'muggle howlers' this year – his nose never recovered from the last two. At least his eyebrows grew back. Again.

It was then Albus spied the box from Honeydukes on his desk. He didn't remember ordering more candy this week, but at his age he did tend to forget. He also forgot to keep an eye on his phoenix – Fawkes squawked loudly and flashed away when he saw the headmaster pick up the box. With a shrug Albus lifted the lid...

BARRROOOOOM!

Petunia wasn't so silly as to send her 'muggle howlers' in the same kind of box every time. And this time Pomfrey would have to really look to find all the bits of the headmaster's nose.

Chapter 13– Goblet of Fire Denied

“Oh Harry – did you sneak your name into the goblet?” Ginny simpered at the Boy-Who-Lived, who was rolling his eyes.

“No Ginny – I did not. You heard Dumbledore – people *die* in the tournament. I might be a brave Gryffindor, but I’m not an idiot.” Harry pointedly turned away from the fawning red-head.

“Yah – but the money would be a dream” sighed Fred.

“Yes – we could start up our joke shop” agreed George.

“How much do you need?” Harry asked, taking a sudden interest. “I’d be glad to give you a business start-up loan – your inventions are super!”

The three boys started chatting about marketing, capitol, and other things that are boring unless it’s your own business you are talking about, when the headmaster started to pull the names out of the flaming goblet. They clapped distractedly as Cedric’s name was called, then Victor Krum (to which Ron leapt to his feet and cheered like a looney), and finally Fleur Delacour (to which Ron leapt to his feet and cheered like a looney).

“HARRY POTTER!” Dumbledore yelled in anger. The room grew suddenly still and Harry looked up from the twins in confusion.

“What?” he asked, looking around at the hundreds of faces glaring at him.

“The goblet has declared you the forth champion for the tournament” the headmaster shouted, anger rolling off of him in tangible waves. Harry stared at him curiously, part of his brain thinking just how stupid the man looked with only half a nose. Pomfrey never did find the lower bit to re-attach. “Did you enter your name?”

Harry stood to his feet shakily. “No I did not. I’m too young and I don’t want to be in the tournament. Someone is pulling a prank.”

“Well, get up here and join the rest of the champions” the headmaster sneered at the boy. This was one way to get back at the Dursleys for blowing his nose off his face three times. He could feel his fake eyebrow starting to slip off his forehead. The students all started to boo the Boy-Who-Lived for his obvious cheating. The fact that 80 percent of the students had attempted to enter illegally evidently didn’t cross their minds.

“No sir, I will not” Harry sat back down abruptly.

“WHAAAAAT?” Albus Dumbledore yelled, furious at being ignored. “The goblet is a legally binding contract. You are now a champion!”

“No, sir. I am not. I did not join. I did not enter. There cannot be anything binding about someone else sticking your name in the cup. I am not a champion, I will not be a champion, I am not leaving my seat.” Harry glared at the headmaster. He couldn’t wait to write his Aunt and Uncle.

Students started to applaud Harry for his backbone. It was obvious he didn’t want to be in the tournament, and what the boy said made sense to everyone – everyone but Dumbledore and Cornelius Fudge that is.

Fudge was following Harry around like a love-sick teenager. Ginny was following Harry around like a love-sick teenager. Dumbledore did too, but not as closely - he kept having to glue his eyebrows back on. The adults were desperate to get the infamous Boy-Who-Lived to sign the contract. Ginny was desperate, period.

The next morning Harry ran to Papa’s hut to use his floo. He grabbed his Aunt and Uncle Dursley to explain the situation. Petunia went to her kitchen to start working on the next ‘howler’ for the headmaster, and Vernon took his nephew to see Aunt Marge and find a solicitor that could work both muggle and magic law.

The next day Harry returned to Hogwarts, lawyer in tow. Dumbledore hadn’t even realized Harry was missing (though naturally Ginny had). The green-eyed boy marched up to the gargoyle steps and demanded an immediate meeting with the headmaster and Fudge, and surprisingly got his wish.

Two hours later Dumbledore was curled up fetal position under his desk, whimpering. Fudge returned to the Ministry in tears. Harry hugged and then paid his new best friend – the solicitor from Hades. Harry was not a champion for the Triwizard Tournament.

Harry enjoyed the first half of the year. All the attention was on the champions and the veelas – he only had to avoid Ginny. The new DADA professor was really strange – Harry could not understand how he stayed out of Azkaban when he performed the three forbidden curses in front of a whole classroom of witnesses, but at least the man hadn't tried to kill him yet.

The ball was announced, and Ginny was practically hyperventilating trying to get Harry's attention in the great hall. Without a second thought Harry stood and marched over to the Ravenclaw table and asked Luna Lovegood out. She was the one girl in the whole school who never treated him differently once his identity became known.

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The second half of the year did not go so well. Besides having to watch Ron make a fool of himself over veelas and Hermione, avoid Ginny the Stalker, and the lack of Quidditch, Harry found himself grabbed and apparated late one night to Voldemort's hideout.

Harry spun around to find it was Professor Moody who had kidnapped him. "What's the deal? Every Defense teacher wants me dead – is that it?" he snipped. Moody grabbed him and tied him roughly to a tombstone. Harry watched in horror as Moody limped over to a basket and withdrew a hideous creature – Voldemort in a temporary body. He was able to speak and move a bit, but he was like a terribly deformed and evil parody of a baby.

The ritual was a living nightmare – Harry had to watch while they cut his arm to collect blood, and the insane Moody cut off his own hand willingly for Voldemort. Then they used a leg bone from his father's grave, and Voldemort was reborn.

"All that magic, and that's the best you could come up with?" Harry asked in disbelief. The Dark Lord was hideous – red eyes with slit

pupils, no nose or lips to speak of, and shiny, pink skin. He was not going to grace the cover of GQ anytime soon.

Voldemort merely sneered at the boy. "So brave, Harry Potter. Just like your parents." He walked up to Harry, who cringed – the place his scar used to be exploded with pain. The boy shut his eyes, on the verge of passing out from the agony, until Voldemort stepped back and the pain dulled slightly.

"Come now – we will duel" the Dark Lord licked where his lips should have been in anticipation. "You do have your wand, don't you? Let us see how well the great Albus Dumbledore has trained his Golden Boy." With a gesture of command a hooded Death Eater untied Harry. The group of followers stood in a circle to give them room.

The Dark Lord laughed. "Are you afraid? Come now, Harry. I'll even give you the first shot."

Harry glanced around the group of men. "OK" he shrugged. He reached into his robe and pulled out the .357 Glock 32 that Uncle Vernon had given him and demanded he carry at all times. There were 11 Death Eaters, including Voldemort. His clip held 15 rounds. "Let's see how a *Protego* works on *this*" he snarled and shot the Dark Lord right in the chest. Target practice with Uncle Vernon had really paid off.

Voldemort looked down at the gaping wound in his chest in stunned disbelief for a second or two before collapsing dead on the ground. The Death Eaters were in an uproar. Harry ducked behind a large tombstone and picked off the idiots one by one.

When all were dead, Harry stood and looked around. Nagini was laughing over Voldemort's body. "*Ha ha ha, you sick puppy! No more milkings for Nagini! No more having to lay around and listen to your sick fantasies! And never again do I have to hear you go on and on about how all-powerful you are !*"

"Where will you go now?" Harry hissed at the beautiful snake.

"*I think I will sit on the door step of the snake house of the London Zoo and let them capture me*" she hissed with pleasure.

“You WANT to be captured?” Harry was stunned. He had assumed every creature wanted to be free.

“Not ‘captured’, young speaker. Protected. In a zoo I will not be used as a weapon. I will not strike fear into innocent people. It will always be humid and warm. If I have to go through the indignity of having my venom milked, it will be used to help people, not to poison them. I will be fed yummy rodents – not incompetent Death Eaters.” If Nagini had lips, she would have curled them. She really hated being fed shrunken Death Eaters. *“If I simply disappear into the Forbidden Forest, I will most likely end up dragon-chow, a spider snack, or a hippogriff munchie. I wish to be removed from the food-chain.”*

Harry stroked the serpent's smooth head. *“Well, good luck with that, then! Do you need help getting there?”*

Nagini rubbed her head against Harry's hand not unlike a cat. *“No thank you, kind speaker. I know the way – I've planned this for years.”* She turned and slithered off into the brush.

With a last amused glance at the snake's retreating form, Harry walked to the road and summoned the Knight Bus. Glancing at his watch he figured he'd be back in bed before anyone realized he was gone.

Harry woke abruptly the next morning from Ron jumping on his bed. Thrusting a Daily Prophet under his nose, he shouted “Voldemort is dead!”

“I didn't know he was alive” Harry muttered groggily.

“Well, yah – funny thing that” Ron said. “Turns out Professor Moody was really Crouch's son in polyjuice. He snuck out last night and did a nasty ritual to bring You-Know-Who back. But somehow it backfired – Voldemort, Crouch, and 9 Death Eaters were found dead of a mysterious piercing hex at Riddle manor!”

Harry sat up, stretched, and smiled. “Well, see – the magical world didn't need me after all”.

The leaving feast was spectacular. Everyone toasted Cedric's win in the tournament, and everyone toasted the defeat of Voldemort. Dumbledore gave Harry many a strange look that night, but it didn't bother The-Boy-Who-Won any. It wasn't as if the headmaster could read minds.

The young Hagrid had no idea how Professor Snape knew, but before climbing onto the thestral-drawn carriage to leave, Uncle Sev tapped Harry on the shoulder. Harry turned around with a friendly but questioning look. The normally dour potions master rolled up his left sleeve and actually smiled at Harry. The dark mark was totally missing – Voldemort was gone for good this time.

"Thank you" he said softly so nobody else could hear.

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The two muggles and Harry sat in the Headmaster's office across from Dumbledore and Fudge.

"I'm sorry, but you have no choice in the matter, Petunia" Albus twinkled his eyes with a condescending look. "Harry must return to Hogwarts in the fall."

"*Must*, Dumbledore?" she screeched at the man. "I think the decision is up to Harry."

"But Harry gives hope to everyone because he is the Boy-Who-Lived" Fudge simpered, reaching across to pat Harry on the head. Harry ducked and gave him a look that could neuter a Chinese Fireball. "He simply can not leave the magical world."

"Harry has had enough of your world, Minister" Vernon growled. Harry knew not to mess with his Aunt and Uncle when they used that tone of voice, but evidently Fudge and Dumbledore were not that bright. "And don't give us any guff about Hogwarts being the safest place in all of Britain – our boy's life has been in jeopardy every year since coming back."

“I’m sorry, Petunia, Vernon” Dumbledore frowned, “but I would never have let Harry come to stay with you if I knew you were going to poison his mind against his true home.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Harry glared darkly and stood to his feet. “I do not want to come back. You people are nuts. I want to live a normal life – my Aunt and Uncle provide that. I don’t miss the fleas, the broken bones, the insane defense teachers trying to kill me, and nutters like Ginny Weasley and the rest of the girls following me everywhere. I’m done with Hogwarts!”

“Now Harry, leave this discussion to the adults...” Fudge started in, but Harry interrupted him.

“Fine” Harry snapped. “Aunt Petunia – can I borrow your cell phone?” He whipped a business card out of his jeans pocket and laid it on Dumbledore’s desk. It was phone number for the Solicitor from Hades.

Fudge and Dumbledore immediately broke into a sweat. Fudge started to tear up.

“We will be in touch with you later – give yourself the summer to consider” Dumbledore pleaded, gesturing them out the door.

“Come along, Harry” Petunia grabbed her nephew and husband by their elbows. “We are in a hurry.”

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Albus was saying goodbye to the Minister. They were not pleased how the meeting went. Fudge glanced over at the empty chairs the Dursleys had occupied. “Isn’t that Mrs. Dursleys’ purse?” he gestured.

“Why yes, Cornelius” Albus smiled. “She must have forgotten it in her haste. Well that guarantees they will be back!” He rubbed his hands together with glee.

“Why is it ticking?” Fudge pondered.

BABABAROOOOMMM!

The two wizards blinked and looked at each other through the smoke and rubble of what used to be the headmaster's office.

"Don't fret, Cornelius" Dumbledore sighed in defeat. "Poppy is real good at re-attaching those."

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The summer ended without another word from Hogwarts. They had finally got the message. Harry didn't cut off all ties – he still delighted in visits from his Papa, Aunts Minny and Poppy, and Uncle Sev. He still hung out with Ron and the twins (who started a very successful gag shop with his loan), and kept in touch with Luna and Hermione. But he was really looking forward to Smeltings and Dudley showing him the ropes of a normal life.

It was the last day of holiday. Petunia had cooked a marvelous meal and everyone was sitting back contentedly.

"Now, Harry – we have a gift for you from the three of us." Vernon and she smiled warmly at their nephew. "You are under no obligation to accept it."

Puzzled, Harry took the envelope from his Aunt's hands and opened it. It was a certificate of adoption to officially make him Harry Dursley. All it needed was his signature.

"Do you have a pen?" he begged, flashing his ever-powerful puppy-dog eyes at his beloved mum and dad.

The End

Author Notes: *I really wanted to use the 40cal Glock 27, as it is my absolutely favorite pistol, but I figured it would weight too much for young Harry to carry around fully loaded. Hey – a Glock is sweet no matter what the caliber, and a 357 will do the trick too. My son wanted Harry to use an Uzi or other machine-type gun, but I had to convince him that it would be hard to keep concealed – even under Hogwarts robes. And shooting automatic weapons is no where near as easy or fun as it looks in the movies.*

Does anyone else wonder why Moody/Crouch didn't just kidnap Harry in GoF? Why the big involved plot with hiding as the defense teacher from two mind readers, tricking the cup to put Harry in the tournament, having to keep a 4th year student not only alive during the tournament, but winning, and get to the trophy to turn it into a port key – weird and totally unnecessary. Make some polyjuice, wait in Hogsmeade next student weekend and kidnap any random student to get their hair, go back into Hogwarts disguised and grab Harry, portkey in hand. Simple. Rowling must be related to Rube Goldberg.